

### **John 3:1-17 (NRSV)**

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

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Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Last Sunday, the confirmands stood and bravely gave their faith statements, describing their journeys to this point and enumerating what they had learned and what they believed. In the readings for this week we run into a couple of great men of the bible who seem absolutely clueless about what a believer is supposed to believe and how believers are supposed to behave. To all the confirmands who are listening, there are going to be days like that, and you may as well know that now. Being called by God to a life of faith is sometimes confusing, other times frustrating, and still other times a source of wonderful joy.

I'm going to invite you into four lives today to talk about their experiences of being called by God. One of them is Isaiah from the Old Testament reading. A second is Nicodemus, from the Gospel reading. A third is me. A fourth is you. As I relate these stories, listen for four steps in a call story.

1. I was on a journey.
2. I met God.
3. I learned that everything I thought I knew was wrong.
4. Nothing was ever the same again.

First, Isaiah. Isaiah, of course, is one of the great pivotal prophetic figures of the Old Testament. This reading is located near the beginning of the book of Isaiah. King Uzziah has just died and that makes it about 740 BC, before the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel or the later fall of Judah. Isaiah sees God sitting on the throne in the temple in Jerusalem. Now, in Judaism, the Temple in Jerusalem is one place where heaven and earth touch, so Isaiah is standing in the temple and looking up into God's throne room in Heaven. Seraphs are in attendance flying around God. A word about seraphs – they are not the cute little cherubs from Cottonelle commercials. They are, apparently flying, flaming snakes with six wings. And they are calling to each other, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the

Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” You may recognize this language from communion – it is the basis for the Sanctus, the song we sing before we say the Lord’s Prayer together.

And Isaiah responds, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” He says he is lost because he thinks he is about to die – no one, he thinks, can see the Lord and live, least of all a man whose lips are unclean, a sinner, a liar, a person who is unholy, a person a lot like all of us. So a seraph comes to him, this flying, flaming serpent, and presses a hot coal against his lips, and instead of being burned and scarred, he is cleansed and forgiven. And when God calls out, “Who shall I send and who will go for us?” Isaiah replies, “Here I am, send me!” I have a plaque of this exchange on the wall in my study here – if I were being confirmed again and picked a bible verse to memorize, this might be it.

It is a call story. You see the elements. Isaiah was on a journey to the temple when he meets God. He thinks he is lost, that no one as sinful as he is can be sent to speak for God, but he is wrong – that’s just the sort of person God needs. And so he is sent, and nothing is ever the same, for him or for us.

The story from the Gospel seems very different in many ways. Nicodemus is not a famous prophet. He comes to Jesus under the cover of darkness, Nick at night. The setting is not the glorious Temple with visions of seraphim. Rather it is a dark room and Nicodemus is facing a stranger who he is afraid is a powerful magician who keeps saying strange things. The darkness suits John’s Gospel – Jesus is light and we are in darkness, the darkness of sin and ignorance. And Jesus tells Nicodemus that he needs to be born again, or born from above – the language allows both interpretations.

Nicodemus thinks Jesus said he must be born again – this is back before everyone thought they knew what it meant to be born

again – and what Jesus has said makes no sense to him. Can he return to the womb? How can these things be? And Jesus is a little abrupt with him – “You are a teacher, a rabbi of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?” You see the pattern: Nicodemus was on a journey when he meets God in the person of Jesus. And Jesus tells him that everything he thought he knew was wrong, just plain wrong.

But what about the last point, about nothing being the same? As the reading ends, we don't know what happens to Nicodemus. But he appears two more times in John's Gospel. In Chapter 7 he argues defending Jesus in the council before the Sanhedrin. And in the 19<sup>th</sup> Chapter, he comes to the tomb after the crucifixion with Joseph of Arimathea to anoint Jesus for burial. So we see that for him, nothing really ever was the same again.

Now a story about me, one I'm a little ashamed of, but it is part of my call story. I was about the age of our confirmands – it was 1963 or 1964 I think. I lived in Chicago and went to Saint Paul's United Church of Christ. Now, in those days, Chicago was bitterly segregated – many people will tell you it still is. Martin Luther King was coming to march and White people were fond of talking about “the Negro problem.” Those were the words they used – “the Negro problem,” even though most African-Americans didn't really want to be called Negroes. And all the White people knew what “the Negro problem” was. Well, our youth group had a retreat and the topic was race. The presenter was a Black man, his name was Reuben Sheares. And I remember as if it were yesterday – he said, “Listen, there is no Negro problem. There is a White problem. And the White problem is that White people hate and abuse Black people.” And I knew that he was right, he had hit the nail right on the head. And with that, I realized that everything I had ever thought I knew about race in America was just plain wrong. I had been on a journey, and through the words of Reuben Sheares I had met God. And I learned that everything I thought I knew was wrong. And nothing, for me, was ever the same.

Are all four of these things in every call story? Well, we're all on a journey from someplace, to someplace. And the essence of a call story is that you somehow meet God. And it is ironic that following the Confirmation Sunday, the call stories we looked at today were at least partly stories of *disconfirmation*, but that's the nature of it. God has never fit into any culture on earth and that includes this one, in 1964 or today. God stands over against culture, all cultures, and seeks, wants, demands love and justice, truth and peace. And after that, after you meet God and find out what God wants, nothing is ever the same.

And now, finally, your story. Where are you on your journey? Have you met God yet? One way to know is whether you've yet learned that everything you thought you knew turns out to be mistaken. Can you look back and identify a moment when everything changed, when nothing was the same ever again? Being called by God may not be a very comfortable experience as it turns out. It wasn't for me. It wasn't for Isaiah or Nicodemus. It may not be for you either. The only thing that can be said in its favor is that being born from above offers a life of freedom and beauty and meaning beyond anything this world offers. "Here I am," Isaiah said. "Send me." And nothing was ever the same.

Amen.