

St. Mary's and Trinity Episcopal Churches

March 12, 2017

Year A; 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent

Genesis 12: 1-4a

Romans 4: 1-5; 13-17

Psalm 121

John 3: 1-17

**“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Amen.**

**About 15 years ago, Tim and I took our first trip to Maine...drawn there both by the recommendation of dear friends, and by our mutual love of the water, and of Tim's love of boats and boatbuilding. In fact, our first trip there was to Brooklin Maine, home of the WoodenBoat School, so Tim could take a class in boatbuilding....and I could sit on the deck of our rental cottage and read, and snooze and crochet!**

**We have returned many times since that first visit, drawn by the weather, the beauty of the light, and the boats. One year Tim took a class from Harry Bryant, a renowned boatbuilder from Canada, a dear and amazingly creative man. And we ended up friends with Harry, and his wife Martha.**

**And it was our friendship with Harry and Martha that landed Tim and me, about 6 years ago, one very early morning in October, driving on a dark, rain soaked, desolate road in northern Maine.**

**We had decided to take a day and go to visit Harry and Martha in New Brunswick; Harry's boatbuilding workshop is legendary, and Tim was eager to see it, and we both wanted to visit and be with our friends.....we had much to catch up on.**

**The trip to their place was about 4 hours, so we had gotten up early and thus that dark, rain soaked road that lay ahead of us. We had a good map, a gps and directions from Martha, and yet as we headed out, onto unfamiliar 2-lane, winding roads, and as the lights of town faded into the darkness, and as the rain poured torrentially, well...it was a memorable drive! Most of the drive was on**

what the locals call the Airline Road, Highway 9 between Bangor and the Canadian border. As we drove, for the first hours we could only see as far as the edge of our headlights...the dim lights revealing only the unabating rain, glimpses of the silhouettes of pine trees on both sides of the road...and an occasional sign announcing entry into something like: "unorganized territory #43", what we guessed were communities, though we saw no houses and no people....

I tell you all of this journey, because several of our readings today are linked by the theme of journeys....I almost said, especially journeys where we cannot see far down the road, or we are not sure where we are going....but that describes just about every journey, if we are honest with ourselves!

Our Old Testament lesson from Genesis tells of God's call to Abram: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." God tells Abram to leave EVERYTHING he knows, all that is familiar... place, people, home... and all God will give him is the first step, do you agree to go?

And if the answer is yes, God tells Abram, ok if yes, then I'll show which direction to head...not the whole journey, just the next step. And amazingly, Abram says yes, and leaves all he knows, and takes Sarai and family and heads out to answer God's call, with just that next step clear to him....

Our Gospel reading tells of perhaps a much shorter journey physically, but a mighty journey of the heart and mind. Nicodemus, a prominent and respected leader among the Jews, has heard of Jesus and his teaching, and Nicodemus is drawn to him...

But as a leader, and a powerful one, he is afraid to seek Jesus out in the light of day, for fear his curiosity, his questions, this hint of a call from God....well, pursuing this call might lessen his stature....so he comes in the dark of night.....

Nicodemus's journey is physically short, probably just a brief walk through Jerusalem, but an epic journey for his heart and mind, to act on the nudges he has felt from God to seek out Jesus, to act, and risk, to take that first step, not knowing where it would lead.

Further in the gospel of John we will hear where this nighttime conversation in part did lead. After Jesus's death on the cross, Joseph of Arimathea, another prominent leader, who, like Nicodemus, was drawn to Jesus but feared losing status and power if he stepped out on a journey to follow him.....After Jesus dies, it is Joseph of Arimathea who asks Pontius Pilate for the body, to give Jesus a proper and dignified burial.

And who helps Joseph with the burial, bringing the expensive spices for burial?.. ...Nicodemus. Another step in his journey....this time in the light of day, as the sun sets on Good Friday....He and Joseph, not bold enough to follow, perhaps regretting all that had held them back from risking knowing Jesus as friend and savior....but still now doing something, doing what they can.

We all have regrets about what we lack the courage to do....but like Joseph and Nicodemus, there is always more of the journey, another invitation, a nudge from God, a chance to do something...so they prepare Jesus's body briefly, and lay him in a tomb. They could do that.....

Finally our psalm today, the beautiful and beloved Psalm 121, offers us the roadmap forward....whether our journey is a call, a dark road or a spiritual wrestling, with things done, and left undone.

The opening words tell us the writer is facing some road—physical, emotional, spiritual---and it is a challenging, steep road:

“I lift up my eyes to the hills; from where is my help to come?”

We have many choices as to where to look for our strength and help..... Often we look to ourselves, our own power and energy and strength.

Self-sufficiency has gotten many of us far....We've been living remarkable, successful lives...But eventually, life reminds us that we do not function well as our own gods....

**We are not the center of the universe....And we face challenges, pain, limitations, sadness.... these draw our eyes to the hills, the mountains ahead....how will we even take the first step in this journey?**

**Psalm 121 invites us to join the psalmist in putting our trust in the Lord. Six times in this short psalm the writer uses various forms of the word, KEEP.... God will keep us, God will preserve us, God will watch us, God will watch over us.....**

**We may lose our grip, we may not have the strength or courage to walk the first step of a journey we face....but God holds fast, God keeps us, always.**

**Well, after several hours of driving in the dark, through unorganized territories, and then the barely grey light of the morning, still soaked in rain, finally, the clouds lifted, the sun came out and we arrived safely at Harry and Martha's.**

**And I actually don't remember much about the drive back.....we took a different route, a little longer, but an easier drive and more populated.....and oddly forgotten.**

**It seems that it is our difficult journeys that stay with us, those times, we might actually let ourselves call out.... where will my help come from?**

**And we can find the one who will not let your foot be moved...who watches over you (and) will not fall asleep.....**

**Waiting on all our roads, all of our journeys to walk with us....with us in our going out and our coming in, from this time forth, forever, forevermore.**

**Amen.**

**The Rev. Megan Limburg**