

“Seeing is Believing is Seeing.”

In our readings from Genesis and John, we hear about two men: Abram (who, later, has his name changed to Abraham), and Nicodemus. In many ways, those two men typify the different ways Christians approach their faith. And so, because they can tell us something about ourselves — and about how *we* might approach *our* faith — I think each warrants a closer look.

In our reading from John’s gospel, we’re introduced to Nicodemus. Now, we don’t know much about him, except for the fact that he was a Pharisee, which means — long story short — that he was a strict and faithful follower of God. And, we also know that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, which was a ruling council of the Jews, which means that Nicodemus was a man of influence, and perhaps even power. And, finally, and obviously, we know his name, which likely means that he went on to be a person of some significance in-or-for the early Christian community.

Our reading from John’s gospel tells us about a conversation that took place between Jesus and Nicodemus. Now, in order to better understand the dynamics of that conversation, we need to understand its context. Our gospel reading starts at the beginning of chapter three, but the larger story is a continuation of what took place at the end of chapter two.

In those earlier verses, John tells us that many people in Jerusalem believed in Jesus because they saw the signs and wonders they saw him perform. But Jesus was skeptical of this kind of faith, because he knows how fickle and capricious people can be; that their fascination with him would probably last only until another miracle-performing wonder-worker came along. So, we need to keep this in mind as we think about what happens in today’s gospel reading.

So, here’s what happens. One evening, Nicodemus comes to Jesus, professing a faith in Jesus that is based upon the signs and wonders he’s seen Jesus performing. So, right off the bat, we know Jesus is going to be skeptical of the sort of faith that Nicodemus is professing. And, apparently not wanting to waste time with polite chit-chat, Jesus cuts to the chase and answers the question that Nicodemus has yet to ask:

“The truth is, Nicodemus,” Jesus says, “no one can see the kingdom of God, let alone enter it, without being born from above, of water and Spirit.”

Immediately, Nicodemus is confused: “How can this be?” he says several times, because what Jesus is telling him goes contrary to what he has learned. I won’t go through a detailed description of the conversation that ensues, but I will tell you this:

Nicodemus is not a spontaneous guy.

Rather, he is a deliberate man, who carefully and cautiously examines everything, and subjects them to painstaking scrutiny, before he can jump in and embrace them.

In other words, *Nicodemus’ approach to faith and life* falls under the general heading of “Seeing is believing.”

Now, in the reading from Genesis, we are introduced to a man named Abram. And, again, a little bit of context would be helpful.

Abram lived nearly 4,000 years ago in Mesopotamia — an area which includes parts of modern Syria, Turkey, and Iraq. It was a time when a person’s identity was defined almost entirely by his land, his holdings, and his extended family. Nothing was more important than your physical place in the world, and in your tribe or your clan. And so, one day, and in only a few sentences, God tell Abram what’s on God’s mind:

“Pack everything up,” God says to Abram, “because you’re moving from your homeland, and your people, to an entirely different place that’ll be your new home. There, things will go really well for you.”

And do you know what? Abraham did exactly as God instructed. In other words,

Abram was a pretty spontaneous guy.

Even though he had an established and settled life, and no problems serious enough to warrant mentioning, the minute God says to him “Go,” Abram simply says “Okay.”

In other words, *Abram's approach to faith and life* falls under the general heading of "Believing is seeing."

The contrast between Nicodemus and Abram really couldn't be any more clear. Even though they've each had an encounter with God, that calls them to change the direction of their life, and change the way they look at life, one hesitates and the other doesn't. And each of us can probably identify with one of the two men, Nicodemus or Abram.

I know that I tend to be more like Nicodemus. For example: show me something new, suggest a new way of doing things — the white wine at Communion notwithstanding — propose a change in plans, and I need lots of time to think things through.

My wife, Peggy, however, I think is more like Abram: suggest something new, and, as often as not, she's out the door, with car keys in one hand, and pulling on her jacket with the other.

And it irritates me, sometimes, that my wife is so spontaneous. And I think it irritates her, sometimes, that I'm not. And the beauty of our relationship is that, after spending nearly 33 years together, I've become somewhat more spontaneous, and she's become somewhat more ... well, let's say ... more like me. And that's not a bad thing.

So what we have been presented with, in Nicodemus and Abram, are two ways — and likely two ways among many — of approaching faith and life, and God.

Now, did you notice that there wasn't any hint of condemnation of Nicodemus for his being so deliberate? And, did you notice that there wasn't any condemnation of Abram for being so spontaneous? And not only that, but neither was there any suggestion that one approach to faith and life is to be preferred over any other?

You see, what these readings do imply, is that people approach their relationship to God differently; that their faith in God may be based upon different standards; and that their striving towards the kingdom of God may take them along different paths.

The reason this is important to keep in mind, is because many of us may be tempted to dismiss or even criticize someone like Nicodemus, because his

profession of faith was based upon the signs and wonders he's witnessed. But before we do that, we also need to keep in mind that it was Nicodemus who stood up for Jesus when he was brought before the Sanhedrin. And, with the help of Joseph of Arimathea, it was Nicodemus who provided a tomb, and the materials necessary to prepare Jesus' body for burial.

And for those of us who may be tempted to praise Abram for his quick and easy faith in God — you know, for picking up and leaving everything at the drop of a hat — we do need to remember that, down the road, Abram got into a *lot* of trouble, and much of it was his own doing.

And so, I think the message of today's lessons can probably be reduced to this: that God comes to us through a variety of ways. He can come to us through miracles and signs and wonders, like with Nicodemus. Or, he can come to us through the voice we hear in our heart-of-hearts, like with Abram. But those are only two of the myriad ways that God comes into the lives of his people. And our task is to keep our eyes and ears and hearts open, because God will invariably come to us, and to others, in ways we least expect.

So whether you're like Nicodemus, and embrace the philosophy that "seeing is believing," or you're like Abram, and embrace the philosophy that "believing is seeing," today's readings tell us *that you're both right*. For when your goal and aim is to know God, and to make God known, it's hard to go wrong.

Amen.