

Covenant Word

An Inconvenient Gospel

Genesis 12:1-4a; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17

*A Message by
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If you have not had the opportunity to view the movie "Amazing Grace," I would encourage you to do so. It tells the moving story of William Wilberforce who was a British politician and philanthropist. Challenged in 1787 by William Pitt and future Prime Minister William Grenville to bring a motion before Parliament, Wilberforce devoted his

life to the abolition of the British slave trade. He gave impassioned speeches in Parliament. Some lasted up to four hours. He

wrote books, established societies, and enlisted the aid of other politicians. The extreme hostility that he encountered threatened to break his health. It was not, however, until one month after his death in 1833 (46 years later), that Parliament passed the Slavery Abolition Act which gave most of the slaves in the British Empire their freedom.

History clearly records that Wilberforce's evangelical conversion as a young man played a large part in his concern for the slaves. The movie shows him, shortly after his conversion experience, slipping away from his duties to sketch the wonders of nature on his drawing pad. He prays at that time, "Dear God, I know it is utterly absurd, but I feel I must meet you in secret." He looks up only to find his steward, Richard, observing him. "I know I am not acting normally, Richard. It's God."

Richard asks, "Did you find God, sir?"

To which Wilberforce confesses, "I think God found me. Do you have any idea how inconvenient that is?"

Abraham and Sarah knew how inconvenient faith can be. With his family at a literal crossroads, Abraham is faced with deciding whether to accept with belief the promises of God or to stay within the

safety of his known circumstances.

In ancient societies, place and relationships were the most important considerations in making decisions. One's home and network of family and friends provided support and a means of earning a living. Without the political and economic structures that are in place today, to move beyond one's homeland was considered to be more than inconvenient. It was difficult and dangerous. There were no rules that could be counted on and no embassy to call if there was trouble. (Wilma Ann Bailey, "Living by the Word," *Christian Century*, Feb. 12, 2007)

In addition, Abraham is not promised that life will be better in Canaan. He is told that his name will become great, that he will be made into a great people, and that he will be a blessing. He is not told, however, that he will be better off materially. Knowing that he will leave behind the language that he speaks and understands, his reputation, his network of kinfolk, his knowledge of a place and how to survive in it, it is almost guaranteed that life will be harder should he move. (Bailey)

To remain within the realm of certainty, however, was to remain barren, and to leave in risk was to have hope. Being the head of his family upon his father's death,

Abraham is forced to choose. Does he stay in Haran, or does he continue on to that promised land of Canaan? It is the difference between deciding to hold on to tradition or to risk fathering a new way of thinking and believing. God tells Abraham to leave behind the land, birthplace and house of his father...all the baggage that makes it difficult to do something new...because otherwise, it is all too easy to say, "But this is how we have always done it!" (Bailey)

The passage from Genesis that was read earlier is preceded by a chapter of genealogy. Reading through the names found within the family history, it is evident that this family has come to a point of admitting that they are barren, hopeless and that the foreseeable future is bleak. Yet as students of scripture, we know that barrenness is exactly the arena in which God's life-giving action is most powerfully displayed. So God speaks to this couple of Abraham and Sarah who seemingly have no potential. He makes promises to them in the first person: "I will make you," "I will bless you," "I will magnify your name," "I will bless those who bless you," and "I will curse those who curse you." Upon hearing these promises, Abraham believes and obeys without asking any questions. Walter Brueggemann says of Abraham, "Believing the promise without any visible elements is what is



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meant by faith. ...Abraham, therefore, is the prototype for all disciples who forsake everything and follow.” (Interpretation: Genesis) So Abraham moves his family south. It gives us the metaphor of faith being like a journey, because people of faith are always in pursuit of fulfilling God’s promises.

While Abraham and Sarah are inconvenienced by giving up their outer environment, we find in the gospel reading that Nicodemus is asked to change his inner environment, in other words, the territory of his soul and spirit.

Nicodemus is a learned man. He is a member of the Sanhedrin, the most devout order of Judaism. Yet he is also a man who is open to growing his faith, and so he desires to know more about this itinerant preacher who has captured the attention of so many.

So Nicodemus comes to Jesus during the night. This detail is important to the writer of John’s gospel, for night is the time of unknowing. It is the time of day which the writer believes to be ruled by chaos, and sometimes in this gospel, darkness is the setting for evil. You will remember that later in John’s gospel that Judas steps out...where?...into the darkness in order to betray Jesus. In the opening verses of John’s gospel, Jesus is called the Light of the world, even as God’s first word in creation was for there to be light. So as Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, in the darkness, we immediately begin to wonder, will he be able to see the Light?

Commentators have speculated about why Nicodemus came in the dark. Was it to protect his reputation? Was he looking for a way to be anonymous? Was he putting himself in danger of losing his position as a member of the Sanhedrin? Was it to symbolically show his darkness of understanding, faith struggle and searching heart? Was it to make Jesus’ words about “being born” more dramatic since we know that conception and growth take place in the dark places of a woman’s womb and only in birth does what has been created come into the light?

All we know is that Nicodemus comes in the darkness, an inconvenient time, to ask inconvenient questions of the One who is the Light of the World. He knocks on the door and immediately makes a statement to Jesus: “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.” As he stops to take a breath, we begin to wonder if he is waiting for Jesus to confirm the statement. After all, his intention is clear. Nicodemus has not come to entrap Jesus with another question about the Law. He just wants to have a better understanding of God.

At this point of the story, I long for Jesus to give Nicodemus a simple answer. Overhearing this conversation, I want a simple answer because it will answer the similar questions that we ask. An understandable answer could tell us about our own resistance to give up what is safe and familiar and to take a walk into the darkness where nothing is certain or comfortable and where we are likely to be inconvenienced by the convictions we encounter. How much easier it would be if Jesus would just answer clearly. But instead, Jesus answers with riddles about water, spirit and wind and that phrase “you must be born again.”

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Born again. There may be no phrase so misused and misunderstood in Christian circles. *Born again* is what got Jimmy Carter in trouble in his magazine interview. *Born again* is what some churches demand of their members in order to qualify as true believers. They assume the phrase is self-

explanatory, as if every Christian experiences the birth of faith in the same rite-of-passage way. (Anna Carter Florence,

“Preaching the Lesson,” Lectionary Homiletics, February 17, 2008) *Born again* is what Jesus told Nicodemus he had to be, in order to see the coming realm of God. Nicodemus thought Jesus must have been kidding, but Jesus was not.

So as they talk, Nicodemus and Jesus get tangled up in the literal and biological. “Born” is the past tense of the verb “to bear,” which is surely an apt description of childbirth. Our mothers bear us from that world before into this one. She bears the pain, the labor, the weight, the responsibility. She bears with us... those little creatures growing and kicking within her very body... and she bears all that comes with it: blood, milk, mess. We are literally born into being, and let me tell you, it is hard work. (Florence)

Nicodemus presses Jesus on this, and even chides him a little. “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time in the mother’s womb and be born?”

When I listen carefully to those words, I hear a bit of longing expressed behind them. Who has not wished, at some point, to go back, to erase, and to rework some chapter in their life? Who hasn’t yearned for a magical rewind button, so that the events of a particularly fateful day might be played out differently? ...some harsh words replaced by encouragement...some celebration to substitute for a tragedy...Who hasn’t held a baby, and thought wistfully of one’s own youth, one’s own innocence, before age and years did their burdensome work? (Florence)

So, yes, Jesus, it sounds beautiful. Born again! Everything fresh and new. All our lives before us. But how can anyone be born after having grown old? How can we prevail upon our mothers to bear us a second time?

This is when Jesus offers that we are born of the Spirit. It is the Spirit that will bear us, when we are born again. So is it safe to assume, then, that there is pain involved? Labor, weight, responsibility too? Are we to believe that the Spirit bears with us...little creatures who grow and kick and leap as we grow to fullness within the body of Christ...and that the Spirit will bear with all the idiosyncrasies that come along with us? If so, it is messy and complicated and embarrassingly embodied. There are repercussions. There are consequences. There are stitches and secretions, not all of which are fit for polite conversation. (Florence)

It is the Spirit that will bear us, when we are born again. So is it safe to assume, then, that there is pain involved?

Does Jesus have any idea how inconvenient this all is?

Nicodemus, I would imagine, was keenly aware of the inconvenience that this new birth would bring. Like Abraham, his reputation was at risk. To believe would put his relationships in danger. It would require such new thinking that he could not stay within the religious realm that was comfortable and known. To believe the gospel, to be born again, meant change...radical change...in order to believe that God loved the world much less than God loved Nicodemus.

The testimonies that we heard during the capital campaign bore witness to this inconvenience: leaving an established church with developed programming; losing life-long friends and loss of jobs. At times I

would imagine that pilgrimage felt more like death than birth. Why would rational beings be moved to make such an inconvenient choice? The answer, of course, is because God so loved the world—not just those who look like us; not just those who think like us; not just those who believe like us...but because God so loved the world.

I learned about the inconvenience of being born of the Spirit long after I had made a profession of faith; long after my baptism; long after my acceptance of a call to ministry; long after my seminary education and long after my ordination. So severe were its consequences, so protracted was its labor, so messy and complicated was its delivery, that I packed up my office and moved it in the darkness of night when no one else was around or could ask me questions. Like Abraham and Sarah, I was embarking on a journey with only the promise of God to lead and sustain me. Nicodemus-like, I was not willing to acknowledge that newness and redemption...being born again...could possibly come from this experience. But it did. Pneuma—wind—Spirit eventually worked its healing until new life began to emerge.

We are not left to wonder about Nicodemus in this particular story. In chapter 19 of John's gospel we find Nicodemus finally stepping into the light of faith. For he took a stand before his peers during Jesus' trial. He was also present to receive the body of Christ from the cross, and he tenderly prepared it for burial. These risky, messy and complicated actions speak to the faith that had been growing in the dark corners of his heart and soul and, at last, were birthed into the light of day.

Perhaps it is because Jesus finally got to the point in his closing words to Nicodemus. At last, Jesus gives up symbolic language and gives us a formula so simple that we memorize it as children. It is what many refer to as the gospel in a nutshell. Say it with me: *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him will not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent the son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.*

I began with William Wilberforce. Let me conclude with him as

well. One of the most powerful influences on Wilberforce's faith was the leading evangelical Anglican clergyman of the day, John Newton. John Newton had been a captain of a slave ship before he gave his life to Christ and a full-time vocation. So haunted was he by his involvement in the slave trade that he wrote the text and tune of the hymn "Amazing Grace." It is Newton's words and melody that Wilberforce sang as he stood on the game table upon which his friends were playing cards. After he was helped down and seated at a dinner table with those who expose their branding scars and put before him the literal chains used to confine slaves aboard ships, Wilberforce confesses that he struggles with whether he will use his voice to praise the Lord or change the world. To which he is told, "Perhaps, sir, you can do both." It was a birthing experience in which Spirit worked

through Wilberforce to bring freedom of mind, body and spirit to those who were enslaved and to his own convictions.

So it is in this spirit that we also sing "Amazing Grace." For we sing in recognition that God's grace has so powerfully encountered us that we

are willing to be inconvenienced so that the world might know of God's love as expressed through Jesus Christ. If there are public decisions of faith this day, I will be here at the front to welcome you as we stand and sing, hymn # 330, "Amazing Grace."

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