

# Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

## Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from February 17, 2008

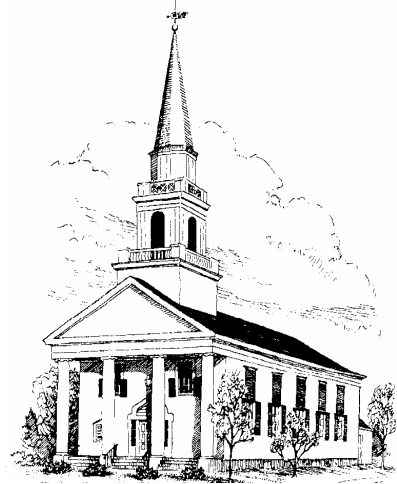
Rev. Barbara J. Libby

### “Trips of Faith”

Scriptures:

Genesis 12:1-4a

John 3:1-17



God invites us to go on a variety of journeys (or trips) of faith. Sometimes God’s invitations come to us out of the blue—unexpected and unbidden. This is what seems to have happened for Abraham and Sarah.

God said to them:

*Go from this familiar place you call home. Go from all these familiar family members. Pack up and leave behind you all you have ever known and go to a new land. Don’t worry. I will show you where to go and what to do. Just trust me and remember, that when you get to that new land, I will bring forth a great nation from your children and your children’s children and they will all be a blessing to the earth. Just trust me and go!*

And when god called Abram and Sarah, they went!

At other times, God’s invitations come to us in more subtle ways—as gentle nudges perhaps or in our nighttime dreams or maybe we feel pushed to try something different. Perhaps we receive a call, deep in our soul, to make a change, to do something new, to open ourselves to the unknown.

Nicodemus, a faithful and devoted elder Jewish law specialist, comes to Jesus under cover of darkness. We may wonder why he came to Jesus at night. We can only wonder whether Nicodemus is such a public figure that he can’t risk being seen with Jesus in the daylight. Or is this such a personal and intimate time of questioning his own faith that Nicodemus must approach Jesus under the protection of the darkness of night?

Nicodemus does comes to Jesus *by night* and he begins this strange dialogue by respectfully calling Jesus a rabbi, a teacher. Nicodemus then reveals that he (and others) believe that Jesus comes from God. Nicodemus wants to know Jesus better. He wants to share the subtle nudgings he has been feeling about Jesus’ ministry. Nicodemus is curious to learn more about who Jesus is and what he’s all about.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus with curiosity and a genuine sense of inquiry. What seems to happen is what sometimes happens to all of us at one time or another. Nicodemus doesn’t

feel heard and Jesus does not make it easy for Nicodemus.

Jesus immediately offers Nicodemus a chance to go on a major faith journey, a trip of faith that will transform his life forever. Jesus jumps right in with Nicodemus and says:

*Things have to change in a big way in your life! You have to make a major life transformation if you expect to understand who I am and what God has in mind here. You just won't "get it" if you don't let go of some of your traditions and some of your assumptions about who the Messiah is. You have to prepare yourself for a radical change!*

Jesus, the visionary and the mystic, seems to not be quite in tune with Nicodemus, the systematic theologian and the canon lawyer. Nicodemus honestly wants to know more about what this teacher Jesus has to offer. Maybe he comes to Jesus at night to avoid the crowds; maybe he comes to admit and reveal his own confusion. And Jesus instead jumps right into an invitation for Nicodemus to be baptized!

The two men seem to talk at cross purposes. They don't seem to be able to talk in ways that help them really understand each other. We can all probably remember times when someone we spoke with didn't quite "get" what we meant. Maybe we didn't listen quite carefully enough or maybe we didn't find that person at their best and they didn't quite "hear" us right. Anyway you look at it, though, the communication isn't great.

Jesus plunges right in and offers Nicodemus the opportunity to turn his life around by baptism and a new life in the spirit but Nicodemus gets hung up on the concept of a literal second birth. Jesus continues to explain how this new birth can happen. Nicodemus gets flustered and disturbed by what he hears because it is not only what he isn't expecting. It also doesn't address the question he thought he had asked! Nicodemus came looking for clarity and Jesus presents him with confusion.

Sometimes we aren't ready to really "hear" when God offers us a new opportunity. Sometimes we aren't ready to really "listen" when God brings us a new challenge. Sometimes we aren't really "paying attention" when God makes us an offer.

Now the good news about Nicodemus is that he apparently did find some answers and he demonstrates later in John's Gospel his devotion to Jesus. As Jesus appears before the Jewish *sanhedrin* and after Jesus dies on the cross, Nicodemus is there. Clearly Nicodemus did have a transformation of his faith.

These six weeks of Lent each year are a time when God invites us to take the time and the risk and the opportunity to pay attention. We may not feel ready to head toward the cross and the graveyard. (There's something about how quickly this Lent came upon us this year that has left me feeling quite ill-prepared!) Yet here we are—already at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent and, ready or not, God invites us to pay attention!

We may only feel able to plod along this Lenten trip, even reluctantly this year. We are reminded of the promise of a resurrection on the other side of the cemetery. We are not always

sure where we are going or how we will get there. God doesn't always give us all the directions. We don't even have a GPS or a map to follow! Yet God calls us to go anyway.

For some, like Abraham and Sarah, saying "Yes" to the trip seems easy. For others, like Nicodemus, saying "How can these things be?" is closer to our journey. Lent is a time to deepen our life along the journey. If there is ever a season where we are called to listen for God's word to transform us, this is it!

In the coming days and weeks, listen carefully. Listen carefully for where God calls us. Amen.

