CHOOSE TO BELIEVE

John 3:1-17, Genesis 12:1-4a

March 5, 2023

Guilford Park Presbyterian Church

(I want to begin today with a little poem I wrote, in imitation of Bob Dylan’s famous song, “Blowing in the Wind,” and based upon our text for today from the gospel of John. Ordinarily I would sing it, but I don’t have a guitar with me; so, I ask you to hear the melody of “Blowing in the Wind” as you listen to my words. It goes like this…)

How can it be that our God has come down,

And leads us to follow the Way?

How do the signs point beyond you and me,

And call us awake day by day?

How shall we act in response to the call,

And know what to do, what to say?

The answer, believe, is blowing in the wind,

The answer is blowing in the wind.

How can we see when our minds remain blind,

And stuck on the thoughts we think real?

How does our heart turn around and be born,

And know not by words but by feel?

How shall our soul re-connect with our God,

And help us to live and to heal?

The answer, believe, is blowing in the wind,

The answer is blowing in the wind.

How can we all come together again,

And see that there is only love?

How do we praise in the church and the home,

And cling to the peace of the dove?

How shall the truth of our Self come to light,

And shine in the God from above?

The answer, believe, is blowing in the wind,

The answer is blowing in the wind.

The packaged Lenten sermon series that Stephen is presenting this year is entitled: “Seeking: Honest Questions for Deeper Faith.” And the question in that sermon series for this second Sunday in Lent is: “How do we begin again?”

Well, today I want to offer one answer to that question – an answer that is “blowing in the wind,” as it were. And that answer blowing in the wind is simply this: “Choose to Believe.” (1) Choose to believe – and (2) awaken to the truth that your choice to believe is the result of the inspiration of the Spirit of God that lives within your very soul. That is “how we begin again” on this second Sunday in Lent.

Such awakening and such choice, I believe, are behind both of our lectionary texts for today from Genesis and John. So, let’s look at those texts through the lens of “choosing to believe” – first, Genesis 12:1-4a.

Abraham surely does choose to believe by responding to the call of God to “go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” I see this call to Abraham from God as an example of the “wind blowing where it chooses,” as Jesus states in our John text – that “wind” being the Spirit of God – the Spirit of God living in Abraham, waking him up to its presence, and inspiring him to choose to respond to God’s call – choose to believe the promised blessings of God. And the text describes Abraham’s unequivocal choice: “So Abram went, as the Lord had told him.” No questions; no arguments; simply: “Abram went.”

Well, the story in the gospel of John is a little more involved. But I think the point of the story is the same as that of the Abraham story. For the whole gospel of John has but one purpose: to get people to choose to believe that Jesus is the Messiah – that Jesus is the Son of God. And such belief arises from the inner inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Also, such belief awakens one to the reality of eternal life – which in the gospel of John is a reality in the present – here and now. The gospel states this purpose in John 20:30-31 – “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

As you may know, this gospel of John from which our Nicodemus story for today comes is quite unlike the other gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke. A particular difference is the way in which the gospel of John – unlike the other gospels – focuses upon the (1) eternal origin of Jesus; and (2) the divine nature of Jesus.

As for eternal origin, consider the opening words of the gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The gospel writer interprets this “Word” as Jesus the eternal, cosmic Christ – who “comes down from above” in order to be with human beings: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us.”

As for the divine nature of Jesus, note that the gospel of John has no human birth story. Jesus does seem to be a human being, but his divine nature takes precedence in the gospel of John. In fact, the main reason for his crucifixion in the gospel is his claim that he is divine – that he is the Son of God – God in the flesh. This idea is blasphemous to the religious establishment of the time, so they plot to get rid of him.

So, our story for today about Jesus and Nicodemus exists in the context of the purpose of the gospel – so that you may come to believe – and the context of the focus of the gospel – that is, the divine nature of Jesus, and his eternal origin. And Jesus demonstrates this purpose and focus throughout the gospel by performing various “signs” that point to his eternal glory.

But Nicodemus misunderstands. After hearing about all that Jesus has done, he asks: “How can these things be?” Now, Nicodemus seems to have some inkling that this Jesus, this Rabbi, has come from God, since the things that Jesus does – these “signs” of his glory – sort of like the “miracles” in the other gospels – could only be done with the help of God. However, Nicodemus cannot yet “see” the kingdom of God – Nicodemus has not yet awakened to who Jesus is – Nicodemus has not yet been “born from above.”

Well, all this really puzzles Nicodemus – who is thinking literally regarding being born from above. This is a common situation throughout the gospel of John. That is, whomever Jesus encounters in John, that person often takes what Jesus is saying literally. But Jesus is usually speaking figuratively, symbolically, metaphorically.

By the way, “born from above” – not “born again” – is the better translation. The concept of being born anew, or born again, is fine, since that is the state of being when one awakens to the kingdom of God. But Jesus in John is pointing to the “source” of rebirth – from above – not to the time at which it happens – “born from above,” not “born again.”

And Jesus teaches that this new “birth,” as it were, is the result of something that God does, not something that human beings do. That is, God freely gives the gift of the Spirit, and the gift is never based upon a thing that human beings do or deserve. This gift of the Spirit blows and blows – where and when it blows nobody knows – and it blows and blows throughout one’s life, leading human beings who “choose to believe” into closer and closer relationship with God.

All this is salvation – salvation is a life-long process of awakening to God, connecting with God, and interconnecting with all that is. And this salvation results from the wind “blowing where it chooses” – it results from the inspiration of the Spirit of God – from the living Christ, the one coming down from above.

To expand upon that famous verse in John – John 3:16…

“For God so loved the word – the whole world – that he sent his only Son – he sent the Word that was God – he sent Jesus the Christ, the divine one living in the flesh – so that everyone – everyone – who believes in him – who awakens to the real presence and power of the Spirit – may not perish but may have eternal life – here and now.”

So, what is the answer to Nicodemus’ question: How can these things be? The answer is blowing in the wind, blowing where it wants to blow, blowing according to the power and presence of the Spirit of God that lives with and within us all. That’s how these things can be. That’s what leads us to choose to believe.

Well, that wind is surely blowing in our lives today as we make our way through this season of Lent. We may continue to have a lot of questions about God; about faith; about religions; about bad things happening to good people; about church and church rules and doctrines; about the meaning of life; about what to do in the face of suffering; about how to be thankful in the presence of grace.

But today we have one answer to our questions. And today we have one answer to the question for today from our Lenten sermon series: How do we begin again? We begin again by choosing to believe. We begin again by awakening to the truth that our choice to believe is the result of the inspiration of the Spirit of God that lives within our very souls. When we are born from above – we deal with whatever questions we might have from that vantage point. Let us choose to do so.

Let us pray: As it was in the beginning, so it is on this day in this place – inspire us to awaken to your Spirit and choose to believe that Jesus is your Word make flesh; and awaken us to the wonder and the reality of eternal life – here and now. In the love of Christ. Amen.