

**First United Methodist Church  
618 Eighth Street  
Columbus, Indiana 47201**

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March 5, 2023**

“Seeking: How Do We Begin Again?”  
Texts: Genesis 12:1-4a and John 3:1-17

A construction worker was on his lunch break. He opened his lunch box slowly, tentatively looked inside and exclaimed, “Oh, no. Peanut butter and jelly again.”

The next day he sat down, opened his lunch box slowly, looked inside and said again, “Oh no. Peanut butter and jelly again.” His co-workers became oddly interested in this event, watching his reaction day after day to opening his lunch box and finding the same sandwich awaiting.

After a week of the same scene, sitting down, opening his lunch box and exclaiming, “Oh no. Peanut butter and jelly,” one of his colleagues sat down beside him. In a gentle tone he said to the man, “If you don’t like having peanut butter and jelly every day for lunch, why don’t you just tell your wife and she could make you something different.”

The man became angry and said, “You leave my wife out of this. I pack my own lunch.”

Although it is a humorous story, I want to wade into today’s sermon by inviting us to look at those places where our lives have become stuck in a rut. It is likely more substantial than a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, but sometimes we can find ourselves stuck in a rut and wondering both, how did I get here and how do I get out?

In her novel, “Celestial Navigation,” thirty-eight-year-old Jeremy Pauling is still living at the home he grew up in. His daily routines are so predictable that you can almost set your watch by them. He isn’t necessarily pleased about that, but how does one begin to change lifelong patterns?

As is often the case, the change begins not with an event of his choosing, but an unfortunate loss. His mother dies and Jeremy is now on his own. In order to keep the house, he takes in boarders. He begins to venture outside his comfort zone. And little by little, his patterns and life begins to change.

Sometimes life’s changes are the result of unexpected events in our lives. The death of a loved one. A divorce that disrupts and changes our lives. A natural disaster that causes us to lose everything and have to start over. A significant change to our health or the health of someone near us. These are all events that force changes upon us, but they are not the way we want that change to happen.

In today's gospel reading, we see the opportunity for change, although we have only glimpses of what that change might have looked like. In all hinges upon a late-night conversation between Jesus and a Pharisee by the name of Nicodemus.

Before we delve into the conversation itself, it is worth noting that John indicates that Nicodemus came to Jesus in the night. Much has been made of this detail. On one hand, the night was often a time of teaching and learning. It was a quiet time when people could engage in deep conversations to learn together. On that basis, the fact that it takes place at night is fitting as a way of indicating that this is a time for learning together.

But scholars have also pointed out that by this point in Jesus' ministry, there is tension between his work and that of the religious leaders. Jesus has already said things that have made the leaders uneasy. He is keeping company with unseemly characters, who are often lumped together as sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors. Along with this, Jesus' actions are disturbing to the religious leaders. He has been known to heal on the Sabbath and value compassion over the Sabbath laws. All of this is important in noting that Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night.

It might be a subtle way of noting that this is a subversive act on Nicodemus' part. If his colleagues saw what he was doing, they would be disappointed in him. It might be a way of noting that Nicodemus has waited until no one will see him, in the dark of the night, before coming to speak with Jesus.

I find the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus to be sincere. I don't see any reason to believe that he is trying to trick or that there is an ulterior motive in coming to him. I believe that he is genuinely curious and wants to learn from Jesus.

The recorded conversation begins with a compliment. Nicodemus says, "Rabbi, 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." He begins with the respectful term of Rabbi, recognizing that Jesus is a respected teacher. And he furthers this compliment by noting that no one could do the things he does without being a messenger of God. In the long tradition of teachers and prophets, Nicodemus is pointing out that Jesus has been sent by God.

But there is one very subtle thing that could be easily overlooked in this statement. It is the phrase, "we know that you are a teacher." Nicodemus is not just speaking for himself. He is likely noting that even the religious leaders, those who publicly oppose Jesus, are aware that he is a teacher sent by God. They wouldn't want to admit it, but they know it to be true.

In that single word, "we" Nicodemus identifies the issue that has brought him there. He respects Jesus. He admires his teaching. He recognizes that he has been sent by God. But there is a disconnect between the things he believes in his heart and how he acts in public. He wants something more, but he doesn't know how to get there.

This is what precipitates the statements of Jesus about being born from above. Our first birth is a fresh start. We are a clean slate. Our lives are filled with possibilities. It remains to be seen how and where our choices will lead us.

But in the years that follow, it becomes more difficult to change. It feels like too much work. We get comfortable in our ruts. Although we want something more, something different, it is easier to keep doing what we have always done. And so we continue, despite our discontent.

Jesus's comments about being born from above are a way of saying to Nicodemus and to each of us, we are not stuck. We can always change. The possibilities are always there. Jesus will describe this with a play on words about the work of the Spirit in our lives. The word for Spirit is the same as the word for wind or breath. It is that unseen force that is always present. We cannot see it, but it is at work.

Jesus tells Nicodemus, stuck in the ruts of life, "the wind blows where it chooses and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes." The opportunity for a new beginning, for a fresh start, for being born from above, is a quiet invitation that calls us to something different in our lives.

The late Fred Craddock tells a story about visiting his hometown in western Tennessee. At some point, he would often stop in to visit his high school friend, Buck, who owns a café in town. They would always sit down and reminisce about their school years over a piece of pie and a cup of coffee. One year, when Fred entered the café, he was prepared to sit down as usual, but Buck said, "Let's go for a walk."

After a few minutes of chatting, Buck asked, "Did you see the curtain in the restaurant?" Of course, Fred had seen the curtain. It had been there for years. The curtain separated the restaurant into two sections, one for white patrons and one for black patrons. Buck was struggling and said, "The curtain has to come down." He was seeing it for what it was, a symbol of a racist time when people of different races dined in separate quarters.

Buck was troubled about what to do. At one moment he was saying, "I can't leave it up." Then in the next he said, "I can't take it down." Back and forth he went. Finally, he saw the clarity of the problem. He said to Fred, "If I take that curtain down, I will lose a lot of my customers. And if I leave that curtain up, I will lose my soul."

Stuck in a rut. Aware that what we are doing isn't working. Aware that it is not who we are. Aware that we want something different. That is what led Nicodemus to risk coming to Jesus in the darkness of the night. Can we really change? As individuals? As a society?

Jesus offers a word of hope to Nicodemus and to all of us caught in those dilemmas of remaining stuck or daring to risk something more. Their conversation concludes with Jesus saying that God didn't come into the world to condemn it. If you will, God came into the world to hold up a mirror of what could be, an image of a kingdom of possibilities. God came into the world to show us what we could be and what our world could be. And God's Spirit invites us to step out in faith and to take risks knowing that the God of love desires all that is good for us.

Take a moment and sit down alongside Nicodemus and Jesus. Come near to the warmth of the fireside where they are chatting. Where do you feel stuck? Where do you long for something

more? Take your time. Don't rush. Be honest with yourself. Don't be overly critical, just be honest. Where do you long for a fresh start? Be still within your spirit to listen not only for the restlessness, but also for the invitation. God's Spirit is calling. Don't worry about the destination or goal. Just think about that first step. Gather your courage. And dare to believe that things can be different. And when you are ready, take that step of faith into the new beginning that the God of love and grace offers to us today.