

# **Hobbits, Abram, and other Journeys**

*A sermon on Genesis 12:1-4a and John 3:1-17 by Margie Dahl, 12 March 2017*

In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. What a wonderful first sentence to a book. It goes on. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort.

The owner of this hobbit-hole was Bilbo Baggins who came from a very respectable family, respectable because they never had any adventures or did anything unexpected. Then one day the wizard Gandalf came to visit and Bilbo's life was never the same. He set off with thirteen dwarves to take back the Lonely Mountain and its treasure from the fearsome dragon, Smaug.

The hobbit is a story of a journey, a journey that took a respectable and comfortable hobbit to Rivendell where he met elves and across the Misty Mountains. He came across gigantic spiders, goblins and the pathetic creature, Gollum. He saved the day on several occasions and tried to bring about reconciliation between opposing sides.

Bilbo never fitted into life in the shire again. His journey had changed him. He eventually retired to Rivendell where he wrote his memoirs and translated Elven lore. Bilbo's life in the shire had been relaxed and comfortable. The sort of life that one of our former Prime Ministers would have us aspire to. But one day, he responded to the voice of Gandalf, a wizard he hardly knew, and he set off into the unknown.

Maybe I am drawing too long a bow, but when I think of Abraham, Bilbo Baggins comes to mind. Abram lived in Mesopotamia, a very sophisticated society. He was a moon worshipper. But then one day, the Lord spoke to him. This was a God he didn't know. How did he know it was authentic? How did he know that he should following the promptings of this voice.

We had a foster daughter many years ago who heard voices, and it was no laughing matter. We were seriously alarmed, but we could not get anyone to take us seriously. Hearing voices is generally a worrying mental health issue that is difficult to treat and diminishes life for the person themselves and makes life difficult for their family.

The voice that spoke to Abram made a number of promises – that his descendants would become a great nation and that he would be remembered as one of the greats. Not only that, but that life on earth would be better for everyone because of him.

Today's reading is important because it establishes the person of Abram, later called Abraham. Later in the year our first readings will be from the ancestral narratives as the story unfolds about Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah. It is the story Esau and his crooked brother Jacob and his wives Leah and Rachel and of Joseph and the beginning of the Hebrews' time in Egypt.

This is a story of promises and complicated families, of deceit and deception and of attempted murder. It is also the story of God being present in unexpected places and of tender reconciliation between brothers. And it all stems from today's story of the Lord

speaking to Abram and Abram obeying the Lord. He left the place where he was respected, where he was comfortable and safe and set off to the unknown. Like Bilbo Baggins, he set off on a journey, a physical but also a spiritual journey.

Journey is a powerful metaphor for the spiritual life, whether one stays physically in one place or whether one travels great distances like Abram. A spiritual journey changes us, we learn more about what life is all about and who we really are. As we undertake this journey, we ask questions continually.

I remember that well before I called myself a Christian, I was adamant that I needed answers to some questions that were concerning me. I was really worried by the idea of a God who would require the massacre of all the indigenous people who lived in the land of Israel as the Hebrew people entered it after the Exodus. But then I found that Jesus was so compelling that I didn't need answers to those questions. My experience of God showed me a different God.

As Christians, our spiritual journey is towards Christ. Nicodemus was a man on a spiritual journey, apparently a solitary journey. We know that he was a religious man. We read about him three times in John's gospel. In chapter 7 he stands up for Jesus in front of the Sanhedrin. The temple police had been sent to arrest Jesus, but returned without him. Their response was that nobody has ever spoken like this. Nicodemus takes a big risk for the sake of Jesus.

In the council, he says "Our law does not judge people without giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it? Nicodemus was a man of justice and integrity, prepared to risk his reputation and to incur the derision of his peers to advocate for the trial of Jesus to be according to the law.

After the crucifixion of Jesus, it is Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus who take the body. Bodies were usually left to rot, but Pilate gives them permission to take Jesus away. Nicodemus brings an exorbitant amount of myrrh and aloes to anoint Jesus. Together, these two secret disciples of Jesus use their power and their wealth to treat Jesus' body with respect.

In our reading today, Nicodemus is described as a leader of the people. He is driven by an inner restlessness, a divine restlessness, a sense that there is more to life, that there is something deeper. Like the woman at the well whose story we'll hear next week, he and Jesus are talking at cross-purposes. What does it mean to be born again?

The verse John 3:16 is often described as the gospel in a nutshell. Those of us who went through conservative Sunday Schools knew it as the ultimate proof text, and we knew it from the authorised version. For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

We knew that believing in Jesus could save us from hellfire and damnation. Eternal life was all about what happened to us when we died. I heard the story of a Methodist minister who was dying. As he slipped in and out of consciousness, his friend was at his side asking, "Are you still firm upon the rock, brother?" Even someone who had lived a faithful Christian life could lose their salvation if they wavered at the moment of their death. If that is what God is

like, you can include me out. It's no wonder that many people believe that Christian faith is about pie in the sky when you die.

I want to suggest a different slant on eternal life. Nicodemus begins his encounter with Jesus by acknowledging that only one who came from God could do the signs that he did. And Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Jesus affirms Nicodemus. The very fact that you are here is a sign that you have seen the kingdom of God.

It seems to me that eternal life is being able to see the kingdom of God. The metaphor of the kingdom of God needs work in these republican days. The kingdom of God is not a place bounded by time and space. It has inward and outward dimensions. The kingdom of God is an interior space for reflection and meditation. It is prayerfulness and sacred reading. It is music and art. It is developing within us the kingdom values of compassion, justice and integrity. As we travel on this inward journey, our faith deepens, our biblical understanding grows and our intimacy with Jesus Christ flourishes. But the inward journey into the kingdom of God without the outward expression of it means that we are so heavenly minded that we are of little use.

The kingdom of God is expressed in our actions. It is like putting on a new pair of glasses and seeing the world differently. It is seeing where the values of the world are out of synch with kingdom values. It is political action, solidarity and promotion of human dignity. It is care for refugees, the homeless, those who are sick in mind and body. It is talking truth to power. But the outward expression without the inward journey leaves us exhausted and burned out. The inward and the outward together are eternal life.

When we distribute communion, we often say "the body of Christ or the blood of Christ keep you in eternal life." We don't say, bring you to eternal life. Eternal life is about life lived right here on earth. It is not about what happens to us when we die. It is about the journey of the kingdom. This is a lifelong journey of personal spiritual growth and political action.

Usually, the journey gives us companions. There are exceptions. Nicodemus came to Jesus alone, but a companion was added to his journey – Joseph of Arimathea. Dermott Dorgan, a Catholic song writer, sings that on the journey some walk fast and some walk slow and no one has to keep in step.

This journey changes us. Like Bilbo's life was never the same after he went on his journey, so our lives are transformed by our journey. For each of us, our journey had a beginning. For Abraham, it was responding to the voice of God inviting him to go on a journey without knowing the destination. For Nicodemus, it was a sense that there was something deeper in his faith. Let us take a moment to reflect on the beginning of our journey and the way that that journey is being lived out now during Lent.