

A Vision for Starting Over

Genesis 12: 1-5 John 3: 1-17

In my “Life Mapping” class at the prison, the students who attend tend to have already gone through preliminary classes that sorts out the serious ones from the ones who aren’t. These men know that they want to turn their lives around. My job is first to give them the perspective to do so, and then the tools to engage a process that they can replicate as their plans change and reach fulfillment.

I’m constantly learning about what life is like for men inside prison. It’s an environment that is totally bizarre by the standards of those of us who live in the “free world,” as they call it.

Everyone wears the exact same prison blue uniform. Everyone has an ID tag with their picture, name, and the all-important number that identifies them in the system. They are known by that number. That number is their identity when they’re inside. They all eat the same food in the same chow hall. They all live in a dormitory of some sort, that is when they aren’t in “jail,” or restricted detention, for some infraction. They use the same common showers and toilets. Their personal space consists of a cot with a thin mattress, a small bookshelf, and a chest for personal belongings; that’s it.

They don’t have doors. Naturally they have limited personal possessions, and those are completely inventoried by the administration. They are subject to routine searches, everything from a personal strip search, to having their room tossed when there is a random or targeted search for contraband, to being awakened at night as dogs are brought in without warning to sniff out contraband.

And there are rules, lots and lots of rules; some are written, some not. The rules can also change frequently and often without any rhyme or reason, simply to change routines and see what happens for security purposes. They all deal with the same corrections officers in two basic shifts. There are always some officers who use inmates, contracting a beating of a mouthy inmate in exchange for some privilege, bringing in contraband, or leveling a false accusation to provoke a search, even planting contraband to get an inmate sent to “jail.”

At night, they should be concerned if they’ve been made a target by other disgruntled inmates who might surround the bunk and issue a remarkably effective beating merely with a bar of soap inside a sock.

The inmate economy is myriad of deals, skill trading, and hustling, with currency in everything from drugs and cigarettes and cell phones to honey buns and AA batteries and toilet paper. No inmate can carry cash.

Overall, it is a highly stressful, depressing, and easily oppressive environment. The notion of personal achievement, personal expression, or personal growth is not part of a prison agenda. Day to day survival is. Most inmates are poorly educated, had awful

role models, came from screwed homes, and were never expected to do anything but fail repeatedly. That life history is what many bring inside prison with them, and the prison environment is excellent at ensuring that personal value and esteem never surfaces.

A lot of my work in Life Mapping is simply to get them to believe in themselves, to understand the promise of God that awaits within their reach. I need to encourage them to take charge of their own life and direction, to be positive resisters who defy the prison culture of control and deprivation and scarcity by reaching for personal possibilities and mining the resources that do exist. I try to lead them into dreaming and envisioning a new life that starts inside, inside themselves and inside the fence. I urge them to cast off the non-identity of prison captivity and begin crafting personal empowerment, the most defiant thing they can do for themselves without breaking a single rule.

One truth emerges very quickly. It's expressed very well by one of the first videos that I show them – a TED Talk by a New Zealander who was an inmate who earned a bachelors, masters, and then his doctorate while in prison. He reveals that his life defined by drugs on the outside was every bit a prison in itself; he was in prison long before he went behind the walls. As he continues, it's also clear that everyone has a defined space that confines them, that limits them, that can oppress them. Being people in the “free world,” we can be incredibly blind to our own circumstances. He ends by asking the audience, “What's *your* prison?”

When we come to the call of Abram (and Sarai) in Genesis 12, we would hardly say that the old couple has been in a prison. Abram had settled with his father in Haran. Although his father had intended to go to Canaan (what would later be seen as the Promised Land for another, much later generation), something caused Abram's father to stop in Haran and never move again. One could say that when the journey stopped, so did the promise of God with it.

We should also note that God's own hopes for the human creation had been fraught with problems. The whole human experiment quickly demanded a new beginning which God brought about through the murderous flood of Noah's time. That wasn't the best strategy and God swore never to do that again.

Meanwhile, the human creation had emerged from the deluge as one hot mess and was getting worse. God needed to start over *again*, and God needed a new strategy.

God's vision for a new beginning lay in the one man who was most faithful to God. Upon this man, Abram, and his household, God would make a covenant promise that would finally bring the human creation into the model of God's will and desire.

Abram had prospered in Haran, having added his father's legacy to his own wealth. Abram was a blessed man, except for one crucial thing. His wife Sarai was barren. Lacking any heir, Abram's prosperity was for naught. Some other family member would gain all his property and possessions. Sarai's barrenness is an apt metaphor for the **dead end** that Abraham faced. In a way, it was a life sentence, or

maybe a lifeless sentence. They weren't young and their fate seemed sealed in hopelessness, a veritable prison of sorts. All that wealth and Abram still lacks the one thing that could make it all *meaningful*.

To discover meaning and new life in this situation, Abram is forced to make a drastic change because life's true promise from God for Abram and Sarai lies elsewhere. He can stay and remain prosperous, but also imprisoned by his fate. However, the promise of God will not be found in Haran.

Today's brief passage has God speaking to Abram, telling him to leave Haran and sojourn on a route that God would reveal. God promised, *I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you. I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.* God may simply be planting a seed in Abram, but God has a really big vision for how all of this will work out.

So at age 75, ever faithful Abram left Haran with his substantial possessions. Just like that apparently, picking up and moving because the promise of God had been revealed to him. He faithfully accepted God's vision for new life, a vision for starting over in another place, wherever God should lead them.

That vision for starting over always sounds enticing. I caution my prison students that having a vision written down in statement form is nothing but words on a page. It can be exhilarating to see that vision statement, but some will think that they have it now and they are tremendously self-congratulatory. I make sure to burst that bubble with a strong dose of reality. Hearing and reading a vision for something new is wholly different from actually making it into the action path for one's new life. That has a sobering effect on them. Real work, real effort, real discipline, and really thinking hard about how to get from point A to point B remain to be accomplished. And yes, failure is an invaluable part of the passage to achievement.

Nicodemus in the reading from John's gospel has come at night to see Jesus. We don't know the reason for his visit and have to speculate. Nicodemus is a high ranking Pharisee, and you probably know that Pharisees haven't exactly been Jesus' best buddies. Knowing the motivation for the visit would be helpful, but we might imagine that that Nicodemus simply wants to learn more about this popular new teacher and healer who has arrived on the scene.

The author or editor of John's gospel loves the symbolic interplay of light and dark as we can see quickly in his early verses in chapter 1. Like I said, Nicodemus visits Jesus at night – *in the dark* – a symbolic reflection of Nicodemus' state of spiritual awareness. Nicodemus is in the dark about Jesus, and likely in the dark about the promise of God that could be coming from Jesus. Perhaps Nicodemus is open to a vision for starting over. Maybe he's seeking a new way for himself, a new way that would redefine his life of faith an open God's promise to him anew.

The dialogue is quite uneven, another stylistic trait of John's gospel. Nicodemus acknowledges that Jesus is a teacher from God due to miraculous signs. Yet Jesus' reply

ignores what Nicodemus has said. Nicodemus' remark missed the point. Nicodemus didn't recognize the miracles as the witness of Jesus to the Kingdom of God.

So Jesus answers the question that Nicodemus *should* have asked which would have been: 'How can I behold the kingdom of God?' To that **unspoken** question, Jesus says: *No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.* Jesus tells Nicodemus that unless he seeks a new life with God in Jesus, in the baptism of water and Spirit, he'll never know the gracious healing, salvation and new life that God is offering. But this metaphor of new life is not a vision that Nicodemus can fathom.

He carries on ridiculously about rebirthing from the womb; 'how can that happen?' Jesus continues to explain about the Spirit of God, that the Spirit moves as it pleases, leading the faithful like Abram into the promise of God. But Nicodemus is immersed in his darkness, imprisoned by his pre-conceived notions of how everything is supposed to be.

Jesus gets exasperated: *You're Israel's teacher and you don't understand!* Jesus draws on the story from Numbers about the staff with the snake that Moses raised up for the people. Jesus is like the snake on the staff. He's **both** a reminder of our sinfulness before God (Garden of Eden) as well as a sign of gracious healing for salvation to eternal life. (Since the snake sheds its skin, the snake is seen as a metaphor for new life, a new being.)

God's grace is evident in God's deep and abiding love for his people, so great and profound that his only Son Jesus is given so that his people might receive life and salvation.

As we witness in Nicodemus, the vision for starting over invites us to step outside our customary and familiar thinking. But as Nicodemus reveals, we can be trapped in that standard space, imprisoned by our reluctance to shift our focus so that we can envision starting over and exploring a new direction faithfully.

It's pure faith journey, trusting in the voice of God that speaks to you, letting that voice re-order your plans, re-define your path, and provide the promise of unexpected blessing. This is the servant spirit, listening for God's promise, a promise only grasped and embraced by faith.

May our Lenten attentions awaken the power of our faith to empower our faithful vision to behold the blessing of God's rich promise for those faithful to the Lord.