

Long Distance Faith

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

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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A few summers ago, I was looking for some light reading and dove headlong into Henning Menkel's "Wallander Mysteries" which follow the life and times of Kurt Wallander, a police detective in a small coastal Swedish town.

These are your stereotypical page-turner crime novels—fairly formulaic, not particularly deep. Good summer reading.

I wasn't expecting much food for theological thought in these books, but there was a section in the opening pages of a book called *Sidetracked*, that has stuck with me since I first read it.

The scene actually takes place long way from Sweden, in the Dominican Republic, where a young father who has tragically lost his wife sets out from his impoverished village for the big city in order to get his young daughter baptized:

Pedro reached the city one afternoon as the heavy rain clouds gathered on the horizon. He sat down to wait on the steps of the cathedral... and watched the black-clad priests passing by. They seemed either too young, or in too much of a hurry to be worthy of baptising his daughter. He waited many hours. At last an old priest came slowing towards the cathedral. Pedro stood up, took off his straw hat, and held out his daughter. The old priest listened patiently to his story. Then he nodded.

"I will baptise her," he said. "You have walked a long way for something you believe in. In our day that is rare. People seldom walk long distances for their faith. That's why the world looks the way it does."

Those last two sentences jumped out at me. *People seldom walk long distances for their faith. That's why the world looks the way it does.*

I'm not sure what your first reaction is to that. Perhaps you heartily agree. "Yeah, exactly! Everyone's gotten soft and lazy! There's no genuine commitment anymore, to faith or to anything else (except ourselves)!"

Perhaps you think, "Well, that sounds a bit simplistic. There are a lot more factors for why the world or the church looks the way it does! And what about people who are really, really, *really* zealous about their faith but are judgmental and insufferable to be around, not to mention plain old wrong, in our view? What about cults? Is faith admirable simply because of the commitment one shows to it?"

In the context of the novel, walking long distances is literal. Pedro has walked a long way to find someone to baptize his daughter.

And indeed, the Christian tradition has a long and rich history of pilgrimage—people literally walking for days, weeks, or months to visit sacred sites, or to spend extended time in prayer and meditation.

Our own Mennonite history is the story of people who are familiar with long distances, making their way from northern Europe to Prussia to the Ukraine, to places like Paraguay and Mexico and North America, always on the move seeking a safe place to be faithful to their convictions.

Christians have walked long distances metaphorically, too.

Last week I got an email from Harold Schilk who recently retired from formal pastoral ministry. He was doing a bit of a cull of his bookshelf and was wondering if I wanted a few of his books.

And so, two weighty and imposing books (among others) found their way to my bookshelf this week. *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons* and *The Martyrs Mirror*. Both of these seemed like the sort of book that a pastor of a Mennonite Church should probably have on his bookshelf.

(Now, Lent is a season of penitence and confession, so I must confess to you that I have not read either of these books, aside from a few excerpts here and there. This makes me a terrible Mennonite, I know.)

But I did peruse the *Martyrs Mirror* on Friday. For those unfamiliar with it, this book is sixteen hundred years' worth of stories of those who died for their faith.

It was often the only book besides the bible in many early Anabaptist homes, and the stories of faith were read as examples to emulate and draw inspiration from.

It is obviously grim reading. There are stories of torture, dismemberment, burnings, drownings. It is, in many ways, a history of those who were prepared to walk the longest distance of all for their faith—the distance from life to death.

Our context is radically different, thanks be to God! We are not facing torture and execution for our faith. Indeed, it's hard to even fathom the world that these martyrs lived in.

But are we willing to “walk long distances” for our faith? Are we willing to sacrifice much of anything for it?

Or is our faith a sort of spiritual garnish on essentially secular lives?

The other day a friend asked me if I thought that one of the reasons that the church was struggling in the North American West was because it asks so little of us.

It's an interesting question, isn't it?

Perhaps the old priest in the novel is right. Maybe the world and the church look like they do is indeed because we seldom walk long distances for what we believe in anymore.

Well, Abram walked a long distance for his faith.

From the ancient Mesopotamian city of Ur (in what is present day southern Iraq), God called him.

Go from your country and your family to the land I will show you. I will bless you. I will make of you a great nation! All the families of earth will be blessed through you!

And Abram does what he's told. Right?

Well, sort of. He does begin his long journey, as the Lord told him, but our reading this morning ends with, “and Lot went with him” (Gen 12:4). So, Abram didn't exactly leave *all* his family behind.

Lot and Abram would eventually quarrel over land. Lot's descendants would eventually become the Moabites and the Ammonites who would be a thorn in the side of Abram's family (the people of Israel) for many years.

So, Abram's obedience was instant and commendable. But Lot's presence introduces a bit of ambiguity into the narrative. There were ripple effects from *how* Abram responded to God's call.

But Abram did leave. He left the familiar, the predictable, the manageable and stepped out with God into an uncertain future.

He believed that God would lead him somewhere good and hopeful even if he didn't necessarily know what it would look like.

He probably couldn't get his head around the promises that God made. *A great nation?! Me? All the peoples on earth will be blessed through me?!* Abram likely had no idea what was going on.

But he took a risk and he set out following this God who makes incredible, bewildering promises.

By the time it was all said and done, Abram probably ended up walking around 1500 km for his faith. Which is a long distance.

Our gospel text today is the well-known story of Nicodemus. The distance that Nicodemus is invited to travel is metaphorical and spiritual not geographical—the distance from death to new life.

He comes to Jesus at night. Jesus has been turning heads and ruffling feathers. He had turned water into wine to keep a wedding party. He had driven the money changers out of the temple that he said she be a house of prayer.

Nicodemus wants to know more about this Jesus, but he wants to do it in secret. He's a Pharisee, after all, and his colleagues have little use for this troublemaker.

He begins by flattering him. *You must be from God, he says, for how else could you do what you are doing?*

Jesus, as he so often does, seems to change the subject. He begins to talk about the kingdom of God—what every good Jew was hoping for—and about being *born again* or *born from above* or *born anew*, depending on your translation.

Nicodemus seems willfully obtuse in his response. *What, am I supposed to reenter the womb? How can someone be born again?*

Jesus is, of course, speaking metaphorically. He's speaking of being born again *spiritually*. He is speaking of baptism and a Spirit that blows and brings life wherever it wills.

And then, he begins to talk about his own future. He talks about the Son being “lifted up,” referring both to his crucifixion and his glorification, and about how the one who believes in him will have eternal life.

Finally, at the conclusion of this morning's text, he speaks the words that many of us have known since we were kids:

6 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. **17** For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Nicodemus doesn't get it. He doesn't get the “born again” talk or the “water and spirit talk.” He doesn't understand what Jesus means when he says he will be “lifted up.”

Jesus even expresses frustration with him. *You are Israel's teacher and you do not understand these things?*

Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the dark to scope him out, to see if this strange teacher really might come from the one God that he (thinks) he knows so well.

And Jesus upends all of his categories about who God is and how God works and what God requires.

He shows him a God who is love, whose Spirit is on the move, who will act in Jesus in ways that nobody could ever have imagined, and who invites all people into new birth.

Nicodemus got a lot more than he bargained for in this nocturnal conversation. He got a glimpse of the long distance between “manager of God and religious affairs” and “child of God.”

And he wasn't sure what to do with it.

I have another confession to make. Thus far in the sermon, I've sort of set you up.

I've talked with admiration about those willing to “walk long distances.” I've talked about the Martyrs Mirror and our own Mennonite history of moving around the world to find a safe place to practice our faith.

I've told you the story of Abram trusting and obediently following God across vast distances into an unknown future and implied that you should go and do likewise.

This is what God demands of those who would follow him, that the authenticity of our faith is measured by how much we're willing to do for it.

I've talked about Nicodemus's encounter with Jesus where his categories are upended and he is brought face to face with a God who so loved the world that he gave his only son, a God who did not come to condemn but to save.

This is good news, surely! God is not a meticulous scorekeeper obsessing about the law, but a lover and a gift-giver.

Yet many Christians, evangelical Christians in particular, have simply turned “being born again” into one more thing that we're supposed to do. *Make sure you believe in Jesus rightly enough!* This is what God demands of those who would follow him.

Our tendency as Christians, and maybe as Mennonites in particular, is to get busy doing for God.

We look at Abram's willingness to leave the comforts of home to follow God into an unknown future and we grimly roll up our sleeves and try to think of what we're supposed to leave behind for God.

We look at Nicodemus's story and get busy constructing a theology of what it means to be "born again" and who qualified and who doesn't.

In both cases, it comes down to us.

One of the readings for this Sunday that we didn't read. It comes from Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter four, verses thirteen, sixteen and seventeen:

It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, **but through the righteousness that comes by faith...**

16 Therefore, the promise comes by faith, **so that it may be by grace** and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. **He is the father of us all.** 17 As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations." He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—**the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.**

Abram was justified by faith. He set out on his adventure with God before the law was even given to Moses, Paul says.

God's blessing and promise weren't the prize for anything Abram did. As we saw earlier, he couldn't even get the starting instructions right.

God didn't honour Abram's effort in earning his justification. He honoured his faith.

This was what Nicodemus struggled to understand. Law, he understood. The gift of life? New birth? What was he supposed to do with that? *Give me something to do.*

And yet, Jesus doesn't do this. He points him toward the work and the character of God.

If you think about it, birth is a pretty passive affair, isn't it? How much did you contribute to your birth? My memory of my own birth is kind of foggy, but I don't recall much!

I think this is why Jesus chooses the metaphor he does. He is not saying, get busy in getting born! He is saying that new birth is the work of God in us.

The good news on this second Sunday of Lent is that we are children of a God who, to use Paul's marvelous language in Romans 4, **"gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not."**

Including our faith.

Salvation is God's work, not ours. New life is God's work, not ours. Jesus did not come to show bad people how to be good or good people to be better, but to make dead people alive.

Yes, we are called to repent, turn around and follow. Yes, we are called to love in response to the love of God shown to us in Christ. Yes, we are even called to take up our cross and be prepared to suffer.

But all our believing and doing is a response to the finished and sufficient work of God in Christ, not an attempt to demonstrate that we're worthy of it.

We don't walk long distances for our faith in order to earn the blessing and the life offered by God; we do so out of gratitude and confidence in the God who has already walked the longest distance for us.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

