

God of the Impossible

“Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’” John 3:9.

*Impossible / For a plain yellow pumpkin to become a golden carriage / Impossible / For a plain country bumpkin and a prince to join in marriage / And four white mice could never be turned to horses / Such falder-all-and-fiddley-dee-of-courses / Im-poss-i-ble!*¹

Forgive me for my poor imitation of Whitney Houston. This song, which comes from the Rogers and Hammerstein’s *Cinderella* movie provides a useful connection to the conversation we hear in our Gospel reading this weekend. That late-night discussion between Cinderella and her fairy godmother parallels the late-night discussion between Nicodemus and Jesus. While Nicodemus and Jesus’ conversation is far more important, it’s easy for this exchange to feel just like that fairy-tale exchange. When reason can’t understand, when experience can’t verify, when human will isn’t enough, considering the impossible seems foolish.

In the Gospel reading, Nicodemus, a Pharisee and therefore a prominent member of that day’s religious society, engages with Jesus in a way unlike any of Jesus’ other encounters with the Pharisees during His earthly ministry. Based on the conversation, Nicodemus actually comes to Jesus to learn not quarrel. And Nicodemus gets more than he could handle. Jesus opens up the reality of God’s kingdom to Nicodemus explaining that one must be born again through water and the Spirit.

Nicodemus can’t understand Jesus’ teaching. Even as a learned teacher of Israel, Nicodemus gets stuck. The born-again language drives him to think about the impossibility of physical rebirth. That’s the kind of birth Nicodemus is familiar with, and he can’t imagine a way to redo what’s already been done. So, based on what he knows and his own limitations the last statement he makes to Jesus in our reading is this, **“How can these things be?”** (John 3:9) Reason shouts, “Impossible!”

There’s more to be said about Nicodemus, but before we can do that, we need to look at our other two readings this weekend. In our first reading, Abram, later named Abraham, is also called by the Lord into a situation of new life. Abram is pulled out from his earthly father’s family to start the family his Heavenly Father has in mind. The Lord promises Abram, **“... I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”** (Genesis 12:2-3)

Such a beautiful promise! Such an impossible challenge! You see, not only were Abram and his wife Sarai unfamiliar with the Lord, but they were also unfamiliar with children. As the chapter before our reading this weekend wraps up, the comment is made that Sarai is barren. She is unable to have kids. To top off this impossible circumstance, the land which the Lord promised to Abram is already occupied. Based on those details, we’d understand if Abram and his family started to feel foolish and perhaps even cry out like Nicodemus, **“How can these things be?”** (John 3:9) Experience shouts, “Impossible!”

One last reading to consider as we recognize the struggle with the impossible. Our second reading this weekend addresses the Christian church in Rome. And from the entirety of this letter, it appears that this congregation was a blend of both Jew and Gentile converts. To continue to foster unity in the Gospel, Paul wrote at great length to bridge the gaps he recognized could come between these two, unique groups now joined as one worshipping community.

The reading we have before us is only a small part of a larger case that Paul is making. The focus of this section is between faith and works. Do works fix the broken relationship between sinners and God or does faith? Both Jew and Gentile converts would have come from situations that emphasized that works were the right answer. However, Paul clarifies for this group of believers that faith was the correct answer. This community wasn’t going to be united by its own will power attempting to please God their own way, but by humble faith that received God’s will and saw His plan of salvation as the only God-pleasing way. Again, it wouldn’t have been surprising for these hearers to exclaim, **“How can these things be?”** (John 3:9) Human will shouts, “Impossible!”

¹ From the song, *Impossible*, found in the Rogers and Hammerstein movie musical, *Cinderella*.

Reason, experience and the human will all struggle with the impossible. It's something that is true generation after generation. From Abram, to Nicodemus, to the church in Rome, to you and me this weekend, we know the struggles with the impossible. We've known Nicodemus' challenge, when our reason can't fathom God's Word. We've known Abram's challenge, when our own experiences stack up so strongly against God's promises. We've known the Roman Christians' challenge, when our own human will wants its own way over God's way. We too have shouted, "Impossible!" And on our lips and in our hearts Nicodemus' question so often lingers, "**How can these things be?**" (*John 3:9*)

To Nicodemus' question, to our question, the Lord answers, "I'm the God of the impossible. Your knowledge and limitations don't prevent Me from giving you new birth in My kingdom. Your sin-riddled experiences won't diminish My power to fulfill My promises to you. Your works aren't going to save you, but My Work has saved you, so that you can freely serve those around you. What is impossible for you, isn't impossible for Me that's how these things can be."

The way Jesus answered Nicodemus pointed him to the cross. Using Nicodemus' familiarity with Israel's history, He revealed to Nicodemus what He, Jesus, the Son of Man must do, be lifted up for the sins of the whole world. By His death, by water, blood and the Spirit, He would deliver God's kingdom to all believers in Him. And as Jesus was taken down from the cross, it was Nicodemus who showed up with large amounts of burial ointments. Hesitant to associate with Jesus during His earthly ministry, Nicodemus openly associated himself with Jesus in His death – by God's grace and mercy his understanding of God's kingdom had grown.

If we turn to Abram and the Lord's answer to his impossible circumstances, that answer also moves toward Jesus' actions on the cross. Twenty-five years after the Lord's promise to Abram, the Lord provided offspring, Isaac. And just as the initial promise is underway, the Lord then asks for Isaac to be sacrificed. In the face of another impossible challenge to God's promise, by God's grace and mercy Abram leaned into God's faithfulness, and not his own sinful experiences, leading his only son Isaac with the promise that the Lord would provide. Like He had before, the Lord fulfilled His promise by providing a ram substitute foreshadowing the blessing of Jesus' substitution for all the families of the earth on the cross.

Even through Paul, the Lord's answer to the congregation in Rome, points to the critical work of Jesus on the cross and resurrection from the tomb. Paul highlights for these Christians that the righteousness of faith that brings peace with God comes by trust in the One who justifies the ungodly, the One who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. The will and work of God accomplished what they couldn't do so that they, like Nicodemus and Abram, might be ones blessed to be counted righteous by God apart from works.

While the Lord's answer to our question may not be what we're always expecting or seeking, it is what we need. Still this weekend, our Lord's answer directs us to the cross. He remains the God of the impossible for us, even as He was for Nicodemus, Abram and the Roman Christians. Through the Bible, Baptism and His Body and Blood, He connects and keeps us connected to Jesus's victory over our impossible struggle with sin, death and Satan. And with this victory, He makes us His own, children of the One who does the impossible, so that He might do His impossible work in and through us.

We have the God of the impossible on our side. He goes with us into this week. He is present in our homes. He is present in our schools. He is present in our places of work. He is present in the hospital; at the funeral home; in the doctor's office; in the counselor's office; at the grocery store; at the restaurant; He is present everywhere to remind of the impossible things He has done for you and to bring you into the impossible things He's doing around you now.

In Christ,

Pastor Dan