

Christ Church, Georgetown
Sunday, March 12, 2017, Lent 2a
The Rev. Kristen Hawley

Bear-ing the cross...

Though the news points to this being a time where the Bull is king and the nation's horns and dividends are up, I have a hunch that we have more than our fair share of bears in the building this morning... longing to lay down, for a fuzzy blanket, a pair of slippers, a cup of tea, maybe or a good book and a cozy, quiet cave in which to hibernate for another month or two. Ahhh – hibernation. For the bears among us, the winter months bring with them the primal instinct to load up on carbs, lay ourselves down and not get up again until the sun and warmth are here to stay. Unlike the daffodils, cherry and pear trees... we bears have not been fooled by this "fake spring". No. We crave comfort and our instinct is to stay put, heads down, sleep masks on... until the real spring arrives and, along with it, our energy and a new hop in our step.

Our friend Nicodemus was a bear, I think. His life was full of comforts: a strong faith, a secure and well-respected job and the wealth and privileges that come with it. Nicodemus had much to give thanks for *and* much to lose if the prevailing winds of the time shifted and caught him unprepared. Because he was faithful, or possibly because he was shrewd, he recognized the potentially disruptive winds that surrounded the man named Jesus and went in the secret and shadows of the night to meet with him. To discern if he was fake spring, or the real deal.

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. Nicodemus with one foot planted securely in his cave of comfort, knowledge and authority and the other ever so tentatively brushing the new ground outside, wary and somewhat fearful but aware that something outside has changed. One self-assured foot planted in the safety of now, and the other open to the possibility of change and promise of new life, but ready to pull back at anytime.

And what about Abram, later known as Abraham? Was he also a bear? Well, no. Abraham could not have been a bear, because he had no cave, no real comforts, wealth or status. Abraham, and his wife Sarah, had no land, no children, no home, no privilege, no wealth – they had nothing to wrap themselves in to keep out the coldness and bleakness of life. God came to Abraham and Sarah in their barrenness and old age, a time when life should have been winding down, rather in than in the prime of their lives like Nicodemus, and he offered them new life. *So Abram went, as the Lord told him.* No shrewd calculations, no hesitancy, no cautionary stance, no cave to hide in. *The Lord said go, and Abram went* – with both feet.

When the winds of God blew, Nicodemus stood to lose much in the way of creature comforts whereas Abraham had only room for improvement. Those of us who have much to cling to, caves full of creature comforts, often find God and the good news and teachings of Jesus Christ much more difficult to embrace and follow than our brothers and sisters who have little. This is not news to any of us, I hope.

Flannery O'Connor once said, "I think there is no suffering greater than what is caused by the doubts of those who want to believe. What people don't realize is how much religion costs.

They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross.” We are making our annual pilgrimage toward that cross once again, friends. Our self-made caves and electric blankets are so often our stumbling blocks and for those of us bold enough to step out of them, we hope that what awaits us is a newer and better version of those same caves and blankets. Not so.

Nicodemus began his journey with Jesus tentatively, cautiously – unwilling to jump with both feet, because of all that he knew he had to lose. We know very little about the rest of his journey out of his cave, except that he reappeared – and this time out in the open – at the cross. At the cross, it was Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea who took Jesus’ body down and anointed it with spices for burial. At the cross, Nicodemus met and accepted Jesus Christ. At the cross, Nicodemus recognized that the real spring had, in fact, come and that the new birth offered by God to him that day began in a different kind of cave – one filled with God rather than his worldly creature comforts.

The winds and Spirit of God come to all of us, friends. The offer of new life, the call to be born from above – to step out of our caves and safety nets, if we have them, and open ourselves to both the death and resurrection of our past lives – it is ours for the taking. For those of us living barren lives already, devoid of comfort, safety, power and fuzzy blankets – the foot of the cross and the new life on the other side may already look like an oasis. For the rest of us who look more like Nicodemus than Abraham, fortunate enough to already have a cave and blanket that comfort – the cross, the tomb and the new life offered may not look comforting at all.

And thus, O’Connor’s point. Jesus Christ is not offering comfort as we know it or desire it. He does not meet Nicodemus, or Abraham, with a big fuzzy electric blanket and cup of hot cocoa. He does not offer privilege, wealth or power. Friends, we journey through Lent each year for the promise of death. Death to our old self-directed lives, be they good or bad, barren or full... and new birth... new life – the “real spring” – a heavenly reality rich with blessings and tribulations that we cannot comprehend, nor predict.

So, whether you are ready to jump with both feet or are willing to cautiously stick one foot out of your cave, may God bless those of you willing to make a move this Lent. Amen