

“The Search for Meaning and a New Story” by Peter Bankson

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This week’s Scripture lessons hold up two familiar stories that illustrate one of our core values here at Seekers Church – finding meaning and purpose for our lives in response to God’s call. We heard a fine example of that this morning as Dave shared about God’s call on his life.



In reflecting on the familiar stories of Abram’s journey to a new land and Nicodemus’ nighttime visit with Jesus point to how deeply our sense of meaning and purpose, and our understanding of God’s call are rooted in our fundamental understanding of Creation, our story of God’s emerging reality.

If we hope to be clear about God's story and make sense of God's call in these times we need to listen to each other and respond to call when we hear it; and expect to be confused; but don't let that stop us.

Our worship theme for Lent, ["How can this be?"](#) can be a signal that our hearts are open to something new, perhaps even a whole new way of understanding the world. It's like the idea we worked with during Epiphany, that the Realm of God is close at hand, but sometimes we have trouble finding the gate.

Brian McLaren calls these new ways of understanding "framing stories," stories that give people direction, values, vision and inspiration by providing a framework for their lives. In "Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crisis and a Revolution of Hope," he makes the case that our cultural "framing story" is out of date.

Is it time for a new framing story? If the question "How can this be?" rings in your ears, the answer may well be "Yes."

God's Story

Let me start with a few reflections on the Scripture lessons for this week. In the Hebrew scripture we hear the beginning of God's call to Abram.

God Chooses Abram

The LORD said to Abram:

Leave your country, your family, and your relatives and go to the land that I will show you. I will bless you and make your descendants into a great nation. You will become famous and be a blessing to others. I will bless anyone who blesses you, but I will put a curse on anyone who puts a curse on you. Everyone on earth will be blessed because of you.

Abram was seventy-five years old when the LORD told him to leave the city of Haran. He obeyed and left with his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, and all the possessions and slaves they had gotten while in Haran.

Gen 12:1-4a

I'm not quite as old as Abram was when God called him. But God's call seems to me like a HUGE promise. It's not like one of those phone calls I get just as we're sitting down to eat: "Congratulations! This is the Credit Department calling with good news!" That's when I hang up. I don't want to ask "How can this be?" I believe I know the answer when the credit department calls. But it was God who called Abram, and Abram hung on because he was ready for something new.

I think that's an important point: the story of God's people begins with someone who was willing to hang on, to leave everything he couldn't carry and head out for the Promised Land, a land he and his clan could call their own, a land flowing with milk and honey. Abram knew they'd need help, and God promised that they wouldn't be alone.

God's promise to Abram was a gift. He could turn it down, but he couldn't earn it. God told him: "Go where I send you. I will be with you, and make you into a great nation." He accepted, and the rest is (a very complicated) history.

How can this be? It was the signal that Abram was ready for a new framing story.

Jesus and Nicodemus

Our Gospel lesson describes another search for meaning, the tale of Nicodemus' off-the-record visit with Jesus. Arriving by night, he began by acknowledging Jesus' credentials: "*Sir, we know that God has sent you to teach us. You could not work these miracles, unless God were with you.*" He got confused as Jesus tried to tell him things that didn't fit into his way of seeing the world. Then as Jesus went on to lay out the fundamental lesson of salvation, Nicodemus was gone, leaving us to ponder the question he asked: "How can this be?"

Nicodemus was a good, logical skeptic. When Jesus told him that he must be "born from above" in order to enter the realm of God, he wondered aloud, "How can this be?" He was worried about the facts. Jesus was telling him about the truths. Not that facts can't be true. But there are truths that aren't yet facts. Some of those are in the stories that give people direction, values, vision and inspiration by providing a framework for their lives.

How can this be? How can we uncover and understand a new story that will help us find meaning, purpose and God's call

on our lives in these confusing times? If we step out in faith, the journey will show us the way. It will help give us a fresh perspective, a new vision we need to be part of the change we hunger for.

Confusion, Call, and a New Story

This Lent, we're hearing – and feeling – the need for help in lots of different areas of life. There's the stumbling economy that has many of us looking carefully at what we can afford, not wanting to spend our savings even to help keep people working.

There's the dwindling of public services. Last week in Virginia, the governor offered one kind of help. He promised that there would be no new taxes. But to make ends meet, the state will be cutting back on schools, and roads, and other care for those in need.

The violence in Iraq seems to have left the front page of the paper. That may well be due in part to the fact that there's less of it right now. But more likely, from my perspective, is the competition for front page coverage from the primary election campaign, where we're engaged in the most exciting competition since the Superbowl, a competition over promises, over who can promise the most change ... at the least personal cost.

Today, as we deepen our experience in a Lenten season focused on the question: "How can this be?" I'm aware of how often the time-honored Biblical path to clarity begins with a step into the unknown and progresses toward a new understanding of who

we are in God's larger story. The confusion seems to be a sign of being out of place in God's story, or maybe not have the story quite right. Maybe OUR God IS too small!

Lots of others have seen signs that we need a new framing story. The poet David Whyte has shared his insight that "our language is not sufficient for the territory we have entered."

In "Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time," Marcus Borg suggests that our Holy Scriptures give us at least three what he calls "macro-stories" that shape the message of Jesus, the New Testament and subsequent Christian theology. He identifies these stories as the "priestly story," the "exodus story" and the "exile story." For many Christians one of these is the framing story for their lives, although the American Dream (Horatio Alger) story of self-reliant success puts up a robust competition.

The priestly story, the one focused on sin, guilt, sacrifice and forgiveness, is certainly the most common narrative for Christians of the dominant culture. But the other two have been powerful alternative paths to the Good News for me. The "exodus story" is one of bondage, liberation, journey, and a destination, as story of God's faithful caring through the tough time it takes to liberate a people. The "exile story" is one of separation from all that is familiar and dear, a separation called for by God "to work for justice for those to whom I have sent you." For the past 30 years I've seen myself most often as part of the exile story.

Twenty years ago we heard a lot of talk about the need for “paradigm shift,” but that language has languished, and the term now draws condescending smile. But I’d say the idea is still fresh even if the language is insufficient for the territory we’re living in.

Although I don’t know much about it, I understand that much of the basis for the whole “post-modern” intellectual movement is a response to what its proponents feel is the death of the myth, the end of the dream, or we might say the failure of the framing story.

Whether we call it our framing story or a macro-narrative, or the Great American Dream, or a paradigm shift, there’s a sense alive in our land that once again we’ve entered a place where our story isn’t as much help to us as it was in the past.

Here in Seekers Church we’ve been living out of our own framing story since 1976. We lay it out in our call:

Our call is to be a "Seekers community" which comes together in weekly worship rooted in the Biblical faith, with shared leadership; and disperses with a common commitment to understand and implement Christian servanthood in the structures in which we live our lives.

Shared leadership is part of the DNA of who we were called to be when we emerged from Church of the Saviour in 1976. But is it still who we are today? And if it is, how can we honor and encourage that as we stay on the journey with Christ?

A Search for New Meaning

The stories of Abram and Nicodemus reveal a lot of confusion. As I think about it, the Biblical narratives often tell of God's call followed by confusion – “Oh no, not me!” But those narratives may have been polished by centuries of telling, because when I look at my own story and listen to those around me, what I hear more often is first the confusion: “How could that happen!” Then later – maybe – a sense of call emerges. And often, the call doesn't come into focus until I start moving in response. It's as though our framing stories are experiential narratives, stories we must live in order to understand.

This fits pretty well into Stage 1 “Resist” in Marjory's Call Cycle. She describes it this way:

In Stage 1, you question the source of Call(external) or your adequacy for it (internal). Either way, there will be a sense of loss of what “was” and fear of the unknown future. Resist feels numb, obstinate and overwhelmed. To move on to Stage 2 you need to find or create a sense of personal safety and possibility. From “Locate Yourself in the Cycle of Call” by Marjory Z. Bankson

As I think about where we are as a nation – and as a faith community – a deeper question for me is whether in our confusion we will try again to get back in line with the framing story we've been following, or whether it's time to step into the unknown like Abram, like Jesus was inviting Nicodemus, step into the unknown and see what new framing story God has in mind for our time.

So now, in our Hebrew Scripture reading for this week, God calls Abram out of this new home, back on the road again.

“Abram!” says God, “You’ve come a long way, but I have something else in mind for you – a land flowing with milk and honey!” He went, but as the story goes, they didn’t stop until they got to Egypt, because when they arrived in the land of milk and honey there was a famine going on. When I try to picture Abram heading on down the coast toward Egypt after the long trip to the Promised Land the confusion of Bill Cosby’s Noah comes to mind: “Is that really You, Lord?!”

It’s a ‘prequel’ of the confusion of the Israelites in the desert after Moses had led them out of Egypt into the wilderness, complaining “We had rather died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, where we sat by our flesh pots and ate all the food we wanted; for you have led us into this desert to kill all of us by starving.”

How can this be? We’d rather be sure of ourselves in Egypt as a people oppressed by the Pharaoh than here in this foreign land where we don’t even know who we are! Remember, it took them 40 years in the wilderness to adopt their new framing story.

Times change, and we find ourselves in search of meaning ... again.

Global climate change! A sagging economy! Stuck in a persistent, painful conflict all along the road between Ur and Haran! A falling spy satellite full of hydrazine that might hit someone on the head! How can this be? We’re supposed to be the nation that makes the world safe for democracy! Confusion.

There is a kind of “strategic confusion” that comes upon us when we discover that what we know about cause and effect isn’t working like it should. You might have noticed it last Tuesday night if you tried to walk on the sidewalk. The ice did funny things to your ability to go where you wanted to go. You might have struggled to hold onto a lamp post or retreated

inside rather than try to learn how things worked in this slick new environment. But this place of confusion is precisely the place where we can be open to God's new story. It's a place where the bush burns but is not consumed.

How can this be? So often the answer is: "Let's go back to where we know how things work. I see a lot of that in the papers these days: It's our version of "Bring back the good old days!" But there's another option here, an option that says: "Pay attention!"

Look at Nicodemus. He's heard enough to believe that Jesus is an authentic teacher, a valid source of wisdom: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one else can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

"How can this be?" often sounds more like a criticism than an open question. But if it's a valid question, rather than a sarcastic criticism, Nicodemus has stepped out of his framing story. He's admitted his confusion. And he may be ready to hear something new, at the deeper level that Jesus is reaching for.

Jesus says you must be born again, of water and the spirit. What does that mean? How can that be? Jesus goes into metaphor and the language doesn't fit for Nicodemus. "How can a grown person enter again into his mother's womb?"

Jesus goes on to talk about how God has sent him into our reality so that we can learn what it takes to be restored to a full relationship with God. We learned it in Bible School: "For God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him may not perish, but have everlasting life."

When I was growing up I thought that meant “Pie in the sky by and by.”

Later I came to see it as a promise that if I gave myself to God’s call the world would be a better place, a place sort of flowing with milk and honey, milk and honey not just for me but for everyone.

Now I’m wondering if my own framing story is too small, if my language is insufficient for this place where we are now living, if we really do need a paradigm shift. In 1990, when I was on a vision quest, in the middle of a 4-day fast, sitting beside a gravel river bank littered with uprooted trees, I got this image of being part of a community: “The river picks up what it can, carries it as far as it is able, and sets it down without anger or regret.” That’s been part of how I’ve tried to approach God’s call on my life for the past 18 years, although I will confess to challenges with the idea of setting things down without regret.

For me, Nicodemus frames the question that Abram wrestled with 2,000 years earlier as God called him back on the road again. It’s a core question of our faith journey. Nicodemus asks, “How can this be?”

If this was a valid question for Nicodemus, he was ready – although not eager – for a new paradigm. And if he wasn’t, at least we have his story and the opportunity to wrestle ourselves with our own tension over an answer that fits the old system or an opening into God’s new story of meaning and purpose. As long as Nicodemus stays in the framing story he

grew up with, he'll be lost.

I wish the Scripture gave us the rest of Nicodemus' story, but I'm not surprised that it doesn't. As soon as he's asked his question he's out of there. He's gone, and we're left with the question," How can this be?"

Nicodemus' search for meaning raises the strategic confusion that signals we may be ready for some new input, some fresh language, some prophetic word. That reminds me of the familiar idea from John Greenleaf behind why we've named ourselves the Seekers Church:

Men and women of a stature equal to the greatest of the past are with us now, addressing the problems of the day, and pointing to a better way ... to live fully and serenely in these times.

The variable that marks some periods as barren and some as rich in prophetic vision is in the interest, the level of seeking, the responsiveness of the hearers. The variable is not in the presence or absence or the relative quality and force of the prophetic voices. Prophets grow in stature as people respond to their message. If their early attempts are ignored or spurned, their talent may wither away.

It is seekers, then, who make prophets, and the initiative of any one of us in searching for and responding to the voice of contemporary prophets may mark the turning point in their growth and service.

Last night, as I was looking for the closing of this sermon, I had a little adventure that might just be my version of Nicodemus coming in the night for that off-the-record meeting with Jesus.

About 7:00 o'clock I got a call from Katie, letting me know that the alarm system here at Carroll Street wasn't locking the front door. Keith usually gets these calls, but he is in Colorado for a mediators' conference.

Marlene was here setting our chairs for worship this morning, and a "disturbed woman" had walked in on her unexpectedly. She was upset and called Katie.

Katie, who lives in Accokeek, Maryland, was too far away to do anything at the building. She called me in Alexandria. Together we thought about Pat, who knows a lot about the front door, and thought that Pat might be able to check things out. So Katie called Pat, who came by to check and found that the door wasn't staying locked. But Pat had to leave for a previous engagement. In the meantime Katie called Astech, the security company but they couldn't find anything wrong.

I sat down to dinner with a troubled stomach.

By the time we'd cleared the table, Katie called me back to say that Jeffrey had been by and found the doors locked. It looked like we were secure enough for the night. As I got off

the phone, feeling a tangible sense of relief, I thought about our commitment here to “distributed leadership,” where lots of us carry part of the responsibility for being an active, lively part of the Body of Christ. That’s not the “framing story” for a lot of churches. It’s not the model for most leading institutions in our culture. It’s not even a very efficient model of leadership. But last night, as I thought about Katie on the phone and Pat and Jeffrey setting aside whatever they had in front of them to come by and check the door, I gave thanks that distributed leadership is part of our framing story.

(I hope this still sounds like good news in the morning.)

Conclusion

This Lent I’m looking at John Greenleaf’s idea with fresh eyes. I’m wondering how we can listen to each other more prophetically to bring forth the right framing story for our time. At this point we need those prophetic voices more than ever. But we also need that readiness to pick up what you can, carry it as far as you are able, and set it down without anger or regret. I give thanks to God for the ductile strength of distributed leadership.

These are confusing times. There is a great hunger for change abroad in the land. And if we hope to make sense of God’s call in these times we need to listen to each other and respond to call when we hear it; and expect to be confused; but don’t let that stop us.

Is it time for a new framing story – for the culture ... for the community ... for you? If the question “How can this be?” rings in your ears, the answer may well be “Yes.” Let’s talk about it!

... keep praying ...