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Genesis 12:1-4a

John 3:1-17

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## BOUNTIFUL

The Trip to Bountiful is a play by Horton Foote that is set in the post-World War II 1940s. It tells the story of an elderly woman, Carrie Watts, who wants to return to her home, the small Texas town of Bountiful, where she grew up. For a number of years, she had been living in Houston with her son and daughter-in-law, who would not let her travel alone. They both knew that the town of Bountiful had shrunk to nothing, but they withheld that information from the oldest member of the household.

Mrs. Watts, driven by a sense of nostalgia, is determined to outwit her son and bossy daughter-in-law. She sets out to catch a train, only to find that trains do not go to Bountiful anymore. She eventually boards a bus to a town near her childhood home. When she arrives at that town, she has no real plan for the last leg of her journey. The local sheriff, moved by the old woman's yearning to visit her childhood home, offers to drive her out to see what remains of Bountiful. When they arrive, Carrie sees that the town is deserted, and the few remaining structures are falling to pieces. She learns that the last occupant of the town, and the woman with whom she had hoped to live, has recently died. She is moved to tears as she surveys her father's land and the remains of the family home. She sees with her own eyes that Bountiful, as she had remembered and imagined it, is no more. <sup>1</sup>

As we heard from the account in Genesis, Abram and his wife, Sarai, must have been searching for their own encounter with what they would consider to be bountiful. Such a trip to bountiful, as it was understood at that time, included having children, which was an inability that the couple faced. Abram's father, Terah, had planned for his extended family to move from their homeland to the land of Canaan, but they had all stopped in a place called Haran, and ended up staying there. After his father died, Abram had an encounter with God. He had probably planned to stay in Haran where the rest of his family was, or perhaps there was a thought about returning to the land of his birth. But God wanted him

to move in a different direction. “Walk with me, Abram, you and your wife, Sarai. Where you have experienced barrenness, you will know great fruitfulness. I have plans for such a bountiful life for the two of you, such blessings that will come through your trust in me that those blessings will overflow to all the families of the earth.” In the scriptural account, Abram doesn’t give voice to his reservations, his questions or concerns, but they must have filled his head. Could he and his wife, at their advanced age, really experience new birth with more than one meaning? Their encounters with God going forward would so change who they were that they would later be given new names – Abraham and Sarah.

Then, in our account from the Gospel of John, we are told that Nicodemus, a Hebrew legal scholar, took the initiative to seek out Jesus for a night of conversation because he had seen some of the mighty works that the unconventional rabbi had carried out. What those works were, we are not told, but they convinced Nicodemus, that Jesus was a man of God from whom he hoped to learn. Jesus surprisingly offers him new bountiful life starting even at his advanced age. There is talk of uncontrollable winds that would blow through his soul and fill his life with God’s Spirit in a way that would take him off his anticipated course. We hear Jesus speak of a new birth from above, and if we are not careful, we may be induced into a new birth process along with Nicodemus. Any woman who has given birth knows that neither the labor nor the birthing is without pain. Nicodemus discovers that he can’t control his encounter with God or even the course of his own life, so he begins to express his concerns. Trying to resist the newness Jesus wanted for him, he resorts to a literalism, which is among the many tools that can be used for safer religious talk. “As big as I am, I can’t reenter the womb,” he declares. But Jesus shows he is not interested in just the safest of religious conversations – not then and not now. The safest place for a ship is to be tied to the dock, but that is not what ships are made for. Some think of a spiritual journey as exclusively searching for roots, but Jesus want to explore what leads to fruitfulness.

Why would we want to move into such unknowns as the challenge put before Abram, Sarai, and Nicodemus calls for? Why make ourselves so vulnerable to a wind or a Spirit that might move us in a whole different direction from our intended course? The new life that is talked about might be less a life of comfort

than our current state of existence. However, Jesus gives a word of assurance about what drives this divine initiative. God so loved the world that God's own self was given that we and others might be saved from lives without meaning or direction, so that God's beloved might be saved from lives that lacked bountiful life. God so loved that God is willing to shake us up a bit, challenging our previous assumptions, helping us to see life in a whole new way, leading us to new spiritual destinations. God blesses us with such an immense love that it will not only shape our lives, but it will overflow our lives so that same heavenly blessing of love will flow on to others. It is a love that does not condemn us. Instead it opens up all kinds of new possibilities for us.

If you want a God who is going to leave well enough alone, who is satisfied with the status quo of your life and the life of the world, then the God revealed in Jesus Christ is not the one for you. For God's embodied love in the person of Jesus is so filled with divine liveliness, that God's giving nature won't hold back, even if it rattles and unlocks our cages a bit more than makes us comfortable.

Returning to the story of The Trip to Bountiful, Carrie realizes her nostalgic ideas of the town known as Bountiful do not connect with what is true and real. So she gets herself ready to return to Houston when her son and daughter-in-law arrive to drive her home. Amazingly, she quickly develops a new vision of how to move toward what is truly bountiful that opens the way for Carrie, her son, and her daughter-in-law to commit to live more peacefully together as they drive back to Houston.

John 3:16 may well be the best known New Testament passage. Some consider its message as a ticket to a trip home that only begins at the end of our earthly life. But there is an unconventional rabbi who spoke that verse and more, who can lead us to a whole new understanding that the One who brings eternal life has taken a trip to come to us. Jesus embodies the Bountiful One's trip to us, and our Lord doesn't want us to wait until life's end to experience it. God so loved the world that the transforming power of that love was not delayed until the afterworld. We are being called to a new kind of journey that is rooted not just in God's love for you and for me, but in God's generous love for all of the world. It is a blessing given in order to be a blessing to others. That divine love opens the way to eternal living now. Divine love and eternal living redefine what is

important now. The Bountiful One's trip to us has opened a whole new way and a whole new why of living that sets us on a whole new trip to bountiful. Thanks be to God. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> The Trip to Bountiful by Horton Foote, 1953.