

The Second Sunday in Lent
Year A - 8/3/2020

Genesis 12:1-4a

Psalm 121

Romans 4:1-17

John 3:1-17

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” John 3:16. Arguably the most well-known of all Bible verses. Perhaps the most easily remembered and quoted. It was certainly the first one I ever learned off by heart!!

Yet, how many of us remember the context in which it was said by Jesus. How many of remember that it follows immediately after the conversation with Nicodemus, with its both remarkable but also somewhat baffling interplay between the images of spirit and flesh, and the need to be “born again”.

Faith in God and deliverance by God are themes that dominate this day’s readings. The figure of Abraham is presented here as the paradigm of one who casts all previous loyalties aside and who in daring fashion entrusts life and well-being to God’s benevolent care. The command in Gen. 12:1 - “go” - relates not only to geography but to the orientation of Abraham’s innermost being, for in leaving “your country and your kindred and your father’s house” Abraham follows God’s initiatives into new realms of loyalty and purpose.

The migration of Israel’s “first family” is a model for the movement of any person from despair to hope, from oldness to newness, from death to life. This is an image with which we can all, I am sure, relate. Not only are our whole lives a journey, but we undergo a series of journeys along the way, movements from one stage of life to the next; times when we mature in our thinking and understanding about specific issues.

Paul's reflection on the Abraham narratives in Rom. 4 makes explicit that which is implicit in Gen. 12 and elsewhere; that although Abraham might be considered to be a model of good works, such a narrow misunderstanding would be tragic. Abraham's deeds are, in reality, the result of his faith, and out of that faith comes Abraham's righteousness.

The God who called Abraham and Sarah is the God who "gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom. 4:17), another way of affirming that the important trek of Abraham and Sarah was a journey not just of the body, but of the heart and the spirit.

There is also a journey happening for our Gospel character today - Nicodemus. It is an uncomfortable journey, as he seems here to get the words of Jesus completely wrong, but it is the beginning of a journey which culminates in the extraordinary actions of this Pharisee after the crucifixion of Jesus, when he comes bearing an abundance of spices to anoint the body of Jesus.

So what exactly are we to make of this encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus? Firstly, it appears that a faith based on the miracles ("signs") Jesus performs is inadequate. Jesus has little confidence in such a shallow belief. And Nicodemus embodies that perspective. He is impressed with what Jesus is doing and even acknowledges that his miraculous deeds are proof of God's presence with him. Nicodemus represents the curious but cautious person, the one who brings his questions to the right place but hesitantly ("by night").

Faith, he thinks, comes from weighing the evidence and drawing logical, sane conclusions. No hint of commitment or risk. But Nicodemus puts the issue of faith the wrong way. Something more than a fascination with signs is needed. Amazement at Jesus' healings and exorcisms, at his turning water to wine and multiplication of the loaves, does not lead to the divine rule. "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above" (3:3). It takes another miracle, an act of God, an action from above, an event that will reorganize Nicodemus's perspective on life.

Nicodemus's problem, and perhaps our also, is that he lives in a one-dimensional world, a world of "flesh." The term "flesh" denotes human existence lived in terms of its own power, organized according to norms and rewards that seem plausible, but an existence immune to the renewing power of God. There is room for religion in that world, plenty of it; Nicodemus represents it. What is lacking is the divine Spirit.

The term "Spirit" denotes an entirely different world, where the blowing of the divine breezes brings a new creation. It is a world vulnerable to the untamed wind of God, a world where the windows and the skylights are open to the possibility of the incredibly new and fresh.

Flesh cannot give birth to Spirit, Jesus says. Nicodemus cannot move from his one-dimensional world to this mysterious world of the Spirit apart from an action from above. His canons of knowledge, religious though they are, cannot grasp the strange ways of God, who persists in making all things new.

The passage concludes by speaking of faith again (3:15-16), but it is much different than mere amazement at miracles, without risk, much more than rational conclusions drawn from irrefutable evidence. It is commitment to the One whose death reveals the things of heaven. It is an openness to the uncontrollable wind of God. It is an embracing of the mysterious newness of God.

The fact that we are presented with this Gospel passage during the Lenten season, adds a richness and a depth to our reflections. Amidst the overarching Lenten theme of desert wilderness and temptation, we are offered an insight into the way in which God is calling us to a freshness and newness of life; the way in which the Spirit offers new life.

Traditionally in the church the season of Lent was the principal time of catechesis; teaching and preparing people for their Easter baptism; re-enacting in a symbolic way the dying and rising of Christ through the going down into the waters of baptism and coming up a new creation. At least four of our parishioners (including three of our young people) are doing just that this year, and we look forward to the joy of their baptism on Easter morning.

But it is the invitation of Lent extended to us all to consider the ways in which we embrace the movement of the Spirit in our own lives; how much the message of John 3:16 is Good News for us.

To think of our being 'born again', or even 'born from above' as being somehow our own action is to miss the point of today's message. It is the action of God, which opens us up to this uncontrollable force which seeks to give us meaning and purpose in our life. Our journey begins at baptism, but we are called to live out that baptism each and every day of our life.

Again, we walk only in the power of the Spirit, and we must seek to be open to the creative nature of God which gives us life and breath. May you know that power and creativity in your life, and may you seek to walk in the way of your baptism day by day.

In the name of God. Amen.