

2 Lent
March 8, 2020

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit. Amen.**

In the first twelve chapters of the Book of Genesis we hear the stories of the Creation, Adam and Eve and the Temptation, Noah and the Ark ... now on the big screen starring Russell Crowe ... and the Tower of Babel among others. Then the text turns away from these mythic tales to the epic story chronicling the beginning of monotheism ... the story of Abraham and Sarah and their descendants. The storyline follows Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel. Jacob and Rachel had twelve sons, one of whom was Joseph ... the one sold to slavers and taken to Egypt. This brought the Israelites to Egypt to escape a famine, but generations later they lived under the oppression of the Pharaoh. Then there was Moses who led the Israelites out of Egypt to a land of milk and honey where eventually judges and kings ruled until Jerusalem fell to the Assyrians under Solomon, King David's son. After exile and return the Israelites struggled in their homeland, oppressed for centuries by one empire or another. And then Jesus, one of their own ... a descendant of Abraham and Sarah ... began his ministry in a little backwater region of the Promised Land. But let's go back to the twelfth chapter of Genesis.

About 4,000 years ago a family of nomads left Ur of the Chaldeans ... probably in the area today that we know as southeastern Iraq near Nasariyah ... and they settled in Haran, which is in the area of present-day Turkey, near the Syrian border. While living there the family patriarch, Terah, died, and his son Abram ... who later would be named Abraham ... started hearing voices. As those voices became more persistent Abraham came to the conclusion that they were from God ... and he dared to obey them.

"Leave your country," God told Abraham. "Leave your people and your family. Leave all that you hold dear and familiar. Go to the land I will show you."

And then the text from the Book of Genesis says: "So Abraham left, as the Lord had told him." He couldn't have known it at the time, but in leaving Haran Abraham began the long saga which altered human history forever. This is the granddaddy of all immigrant stories.

Abraham set out in faith, not knowing where he was going, or even why he was going, except that God had commanded him. This story isn't just a bit of history of the father on monotheism ... the story of the ancestors of our faith some 4,000 years ago. I believe that God's call upon Abraham's life is a call that's repeated to each one of us today. It is a call that challenges conventional wisdom, and so it feels counter-intuitive. Yet, God calls us to move beyond several very human, powerful, and deep-seated fears ... fear of the unknown that we can't control; fear of others who are different from us; and fear of powerlessness in the face of impossibilities.

Abraham's departure from his home in Haran ... taking with him his wife Sarai ... later to become Sarah ... was more than a mere change of geography. In leaving Haran for Canaan, Abraham left all that was familiar ... all custom and comfort, family and friends, all the regularity and rhythm of his life. He had to also leave behind his narrow-minded parochial vision ... the tendency in all of us to exclude the stranger and all that was different. Abraham journeyed from what he had ... to what he did not have; from the known ... to the unknown; from everything that was familiar ... to all things strange. And, if Abraham would be obedient to these voices, God would make Abraham ... and his wife Sarah ... the ancestors of the faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

In this story God calls a single individual, Abraham, and promises him that he will inherit all the earth. God vows to make of Abraham a "great nation." We then read in Genesis that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through" Abraham. We hear the echoes of that promise in our reading from Paul's Letter to the Christians at Rome: Through this one man, and the one nation Israel, God made Abraham "the father of us all." In one particular person God enacted his universal embrace of all humanity.

This portion of the Paul's Letter to the Christians in Rome is part of an answer to a provocative question that Paul asks in the verses just before our reading for this morning begins: is God the God of Jews only? Or is God not also the God of Gentiles? In contrast to every attempt to claim God as ours, and ours alone, Paul says that in Abraham God loves all people equally. And then this morning we also hear from John's Gospel those well-known words: "God so loves all the world ..."

In the reading from John's Gospel this week, Nicodemus is the consummate religious professional ... a conscientious Pharisee, a "member of the ruling Jewish council," and "a teacher of Israel." However, he had heard Jesus talk about the "Kingdom of God." He was interested in what Jesus had to say, yet his position made it awkward to ask Jesus any questions in public, so Nicodemus went to Jesus under the cover of darkness.

Nicodemus's question to Jesus is one that I think we all ask at one time or another. "How does this whole religion ... spirit ... thing work? I know the rules, but it seems like there is something else ... something mysterious ... something mystical ... that happens to some people that actually changes their lives. What is it ... and how do I get it?"

Jesus tells Nicodemus that if he wants to "enter the kingdom of God," he must at some level repudiate his religiosity. He must be twice-born, once by his earthly mother, and then again by God's Spirit. Only the free gift of God's love, and no religious effort, can do this.

Our tendency as human beings is to fear the other, to marginalize the stranger, to dismiss all that is different from who we are and what we know. It is our nature to exclude all those who don't agree with our opinions, and in the process we become like a cult. Cults are composed of men and women who reinforce their basic identity by banding together with others who are pursuing similar brands of identity ... liking the same foods, believing in the same idols, playing

the same games, despising the same outsiders. A cult is good at getting rid of what does not please them ... getting rid of what offends them ... whether they are ideas or people.

Ironically, all too often the Church participates in this kind of behavior. In the process of gathering into like-minded groups we construct religious clubs instead of participating in resurrection communities. However, what we are hearing with the call of Abraham, is that God calls us to a universal and inclusive embrace of everyone and "all peoples on earth." We hear the theme echoed in Paul's Letter to the Christians in Rome, and then we hear it again in John's gospel.

When God called Abraham, he challenged conventional wisdom and moved beyond normal and understandable human fears — ignorance, inclusion, and impotence. Instead of lamenting his ignorance and the loss of control, he embarked upon a journey into the unknown. Instead of fearing inclusion of the stranger and the outsider, he bore God's promise of universal blessings for the whole earth. In the face of his own impotence, he believed that God could do the impossible. In so doing, Abraham became "the father of us all."

The longest and hardest journey is not necessarily the outer, visible, or tangible journey, but rather the inner journey of the spirit and soul. The geography of the ancient Mid-East pales in comparison to the complex geography of the human heart. The journeys we make in our lives today ... journeys in our relationships ... journeys with our health ... journeys toward the end of our lives ... are all visible, tangible signs of what real journeys are going on within our spirits and souls.

Lent is our journey of faith over forty days as we prepare for the new life of the Resurrection at Easter. During this time we are called to "self-examination and repentance ... prayers, fasting and self-denial, and reading and meditating on God's holy Word." Our ultimate journey is to move from a heart curved in on itself to an openness to the love of God, a love for others, and a love for all of God's world. This is our journey in Lent ... and it is a journey that can last a lifetime.

Remember, this story isn't just a bit of mythic history of Abraham and Sarah ... the story of the ancestors of our faith some 4,000 years ago. God's call upon Abraham's life is a call that's repeated to each one of us today. It's a call that challenges conventional wisdom, and yes, it feels counter-intuitive. Yet, God calls us to move beyond our fears: fear of the unknown that we can't control; fear of others who are different from us; and fear of powerlessness in the face of impossibilities. God calls us to trust ... to include the stranger ... and to face with confidence the unknown in our lives.

As we journey through our Lent ... as each of us participates in our own Lenten discipline ... I invite you to ponder how God is calling you to live into a life that goes beyond your fears.

Amen.