
CREATION TO NEW CREATION

LENTEN STUDIES

YEAR A

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“PILGRIMAGE: FAITH IN JESUS AND A NEW LIFE IN THE SPIRIT.” SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR A

Genesis 12.1–4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4.1–5 (6–12) 13–17; John 3.1–17.

Genesis 12.1–4a

The Call of Abram

¹²Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’

⁴So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

The call of Abram links Israel’s ancestral journey with their Lord to the primeval stories of creation, evil, redemption and the engagement of their Lord with all the nations of the earth. God’s call to Abram is the Lord’s response to the dilemmas posed in chapters 1–11.

But more needs to be said. In 11.30 Sarai is described as barren and having no children. This is descriptive, a report of a fact. This particular family has played out its future and has nowhere else to go. It is a family with no foreseeable future and they cannot invent a future. So barrenness becomes the arena in which the LORD will act and recreate human life. Unable to invent a future God will make one, full of new life, for them. The metaphor of barrenness and its consequent hopelessness for the future pervades the Genesis story (25.21; 29.31; see also 1Samuel 1.2 and Isaiah 54.1).

Then God speaks his word into this situation and everything will change (1). Sarai and Abram are without potential but then this God does not depend on the potentiality in the one addressed. God's word makes the difference carrying all that is necessary to bring into being a new people in history. God's word of life will overcome and overpower the barrenness of human reality. We are reminded of the word of God bringing forth creation. To stay in safety is to remain barren; to leave in risk is have hope.

Four important theological themes, themes that course their way throughout the Bible, pervade this simple story. First, Abram must take a journey, from beautiful Iraq to a destination as yet unknown. Abram and Sarai must be risk takers. They must follow the call to abandonment, renunciation and relinquishment of all they love and know except their barrenness. We find this hard to understand because we know vast self-indulgence and cling to the securities that we build, not recognising that the way out of barrenness into hope is obedience to the creative Word of God.

Second, in taking the risk he will bring blessing to others. His journey will become wonderful news for the nations. We do not know how that will be, for this is but the beginning of the story, but that it will be so is certain. The only way to be a blessing is to receive the gift of the future in the promise of God. We live in an over managed world not a gift giving world. Yet this God promises gift; God's orders the world by gift, not the merit theology of managerialism. Well-being, prosperity, security and honour flow from promise, God's promise. We find that hard to believe but it lies at the core of biblical faith and helps explain the disastrous encounters of Israel and God in the future. Israel rejects this proposition and takes the future into its own hands.

Third, God has promised it. Promise is one of the most basic ideas of scripture. Promise brings blessing into the sphere of redemption and renewal. God will create a nation out of barrenness, make a great name for Abram and Sarai, make them a blessing of joy and gladness for all, protect them against the curses and violence of others and the nations will honour them.

Fourth, the way blessing and promise work is through faith. Abram not only believes God is, and that God makes promises, he also believes the promise and acts on it. He enters into the promise. The future belongs to God and Abram and Sarai believe that and act on it.

Questions: Read Mark 8.35 in the light of this story: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and the gospel, will save it."

What does this say to you? God's call is dangerously open-ended. How do you respond to that? Do you trust the promise of God? Do you think the future belongs to God?

Do you believe that together God calls us as children of Abraham and Sarah to commit to bless the world? How can we do that in this social setting we live in? Are we kidding ourselves? Was God kidding Abraham and Sarah?

Can you discern the fundamental building blocks that make up God's plan for the whole creation?

Psalm 121

A Song of Ascents.

¹I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?

²My help comes from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth.

³He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.

⁴He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.

⁵The Lord is your keeper;
the Lord is your shade at your right hand.

⁶The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.

⁷The Lord will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.

⁸The Lord will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and for evermore.

This is the second of a group of 15 psalms known as the Songs of Ascents. Most likely pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem for celebrations used these psalms at particular stages of their journey. Each of the psalms is short and capable of being memorised. Psalm 121 is A clear forthright profession of trust in God's providence and protection.

The psalmist asks the question in verse 1 and the rest of the psalm is an answer. You might imagine the pilgrims asking the question in verse 1 (in song) and then some member (a priest or Levite maybe) of the party responding with the other seven. This is rather an anxious question as the author looks around, eyes searching for the dangers in the hills, and yet it is asked in faith. The author is looking for the assurance of the community and will feed off their trust in the LORD. Believing is a personal matter but not an individualist matter; we trust within a community whose trust supports us.

Travelling in the ancient world was always hazardous and the hills hid many dangers. The hills might be a source of bandits, guerrillas or may be difficult to climb. The source of safety and protection is made clear; The Lord, who is both my Lord and the Lord of the cosmos. Unlike humans God does not sleep, even though sometimes we

think God does (Psalm 44.23), so we will be safe from the slippery climb. Even the sun will not burn us and we won't become moonstruck either. There are no circumstances beyond God's reach, not even evil: even there we can be sure of God's all-encompassing protective love. Not only that the LORD'S protection lasts forever

After Psalm 23 this is one of the most remembered parts of the Bible. Because it uses the metaphor of the journey some churches use it at baptism and others (Anglican) use it at death. But they should point us to the fact the Christian faith is a "Way" and this psalm is for daily living between birth, new birth and death.

After the experience of deceit and oppression of Ps 120 which precedes this psalm it is no wonder then that this very next psalm is an eloquent profession of faith in God's protection and providence. It is a psalm celebrating the trust that can sustain the journeys of life and the journey that life is.

The lifting of the eyes (1–2); A profession of trust by the individual

What the psalmist has to do is to take his eyes off his surroundings, the brutality of violence and the pain of rejection, and lift his eyes. These first two verses of this psalm are some of the best known of the Psalter.

Sometimes the hills are filled with brigands and thieves, a source of danger but in this song they are the hills that surround Jerusalem. The hills are a reminder of the presence of the Lord among his people and the promises He has made to provide and protect. They are pictures, reminders.

It is to these that the writer lifts his eyes and reminds himself of their true significance. My help comes from the Lord and my Lord is the creator of heaven and earth, of all that there is, seen and unseen.

The phrase is familiar to us as it is taken up into the Apostles Creed and is made the theological basis for our trust. It tells us that the Lord whose power in help and blessing is unlimited by anything that is. In these Psalms of pilgrimage it is the affirmation that the pilgrim goes on the journey in the full knowledge that the Lord is not constrained by even the most powerful in the created order.

I want you to notice how personal this psalm is. "I" and "my" are key. Israel, the community, believes that God is Maker of heaven and earth but the pilgrim must make that theology his or her own. It must be the basis for the journey otherwise they will never take the risk and begin.

The Lord the travelling companion (3–4)

Notice the change in verses 3–8. Someone else is speaking to the pilgrim. The pilgrim confesses their faith and a neighbour or a friend, a representative of the wider community of faith now encourages them to continue to take the journey. This

neighbour or friend witnesses to the character of God: It is a beautiful encouragement. They witness to life with the companion God.

This image in 3–4 fits a person who is travelling on foot. One thing walkers can do is slip. And when they sleep, not in comfy motels but among the hills and valleys of Judea they are vulnerable and open to attack.

God is the travelling companion for the journey and he intends to “keep” the pilgrim. God is eternally vigilant; he does not slumber even though we are tempted to think that is what he does, “Arouse yourself. Why do you sleep O Lord” (Ps 44.23) is often our cry too. The pilgrim has to walk in the trust that God does not take rests.

The Lord the keeper (5–8)

Next the neighbour witnesses to God the keeper. The Companion God is eternally vigilant but also like a giant umbrella giving relief from the heat of the day and the madness of the night. The sun was a deadly enemy and madness might strike at night (lunar/lunatic).

But more to the point God will not allow evil to assault the pilgrim in such a way that the pilgrim will be destroyed by it. Nothing will come between God and the pilgrim for God is ‘for us’, for our life. All our arrivals and departures will not separate us from God even if they separate us from our friends and loved ones because often that is what they do.

Nothing can separate the pilgrim from the loving care of God (Rom 8.38–39).

Further reflections

This Ps like 23 is one of the most influential well known Psalms of the OT. We use when we reach for words of assurance amid the trials and turmoils of our life’s journey. We love the sense that God has not only got the whole world in his hands but has you and me, sister/brother in his hands. The psalmist affirms that the creator and ruler of the cosmos has a personal concern for each of us.

This Psalm has also been a psalm for travellers. On the morning of his departure for Africa David Livingstone read this Psalm. Some churches use the Psalm in their Baptism liturgy and some in the funeral liturgy. From birth to death and beyond this Psalm is the psalm of journeying.

The Psalm has been called a psalm for sojourners a name given to early Christians who thought of themselves as pilgrims and sojourners (1Peter 2.11–12 aliens and exiles), as members of the Way (Ac 9.2) as people for whom the whole of life was journey (Heb 11). “For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come” (Heb13.14).

Of course our best example here is Jesus whose life was journey, to a Cross (Lk 9.57–62). This journey was no pie-in-the-sky escapism but an undermining of all the

arrangements for power and privilege that the world then conceived. Herod, Caesar and the Jewish establishment knew what this journey meant and were hell bent on destroying it. And the good news is that God was there keeping Jesus even on the Cross, keeping his life for the biggest surprise of all. The same God is our keeper.

Questions: Why do you think that the confession that God is maker of heaven and earth (see the creeds) is important for trusting God? Why is it important to remember this when we worship? Why is knowing God's character important for trusting on the way? What are the mundane (sun and moon) and malicious things that may assail us and deflect our trust? How can we learn to constantly lift our eyes to the hills?

Read this psalm in the light of the story of Abram and Sarai. What does it tell you about the nature of the "Way"? What does it tell you about the nature of trust? How does it speak to you about your trust and journeying?

Romans 4.1–17

The Example of Abraham

⁴What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? ²For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³For what does the scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.' ⁴Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. ⁵But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. ⁶So also David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness irrespective of works:

⁷'Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; ⁸blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin.'

⁹Is this blessedness, then, pronounced only on the circumcised, or also on the uncircumcised? We say, 'Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.'¹⁰How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. ¹¹He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, ¹²and likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised.

¹³For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

¹⁶For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of

us, ¹⁷as it is written, ‘I have made you the father of many nations’)—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

Paul wrote Romans to explain one of his great themes, God’s righteousness, and chapters 1–4 examine the faithfulness of God. Today we read a small selection from what is a sustained development of his argument that God’s righteousness has its roots in God’s faithfulness to the covenant with Abraham, an argument that begins at 3.21 and continues to 4.25. The background is Genesis 15 in which God makes his covenant with Abraham.

Chapter 4 expounds Genesis 15 to show that God has always intended and promised that the family of Abraham would include Gentiles as well as Jews. After all the mission of God was to ‘bless the nations’ through this who himself was not a Jew but a homeless Syrian. So Paul tackles the matters of works (2–8), circumcision (9–12) and law (13–15) as these were obstacles in his time to blessing the nations.

Abraham stood justified before God not by any works he might have done but by faith, trusting God and entering into the journey of promise. This passage is not about self-help legalism in its context but about Abraham’s covenant membership which cannot be defined in terms of ‘works of Torah’. Abraham was not in covenant relationship with God on the basis of ‘Torah works’ but instead by faith. The covenant is not ethnic; Gentiles do not have to become ethnic Jews. Paul uses a book-keeping metaphor ‘reckoned’ to get his point across. It was put to Abraham’s account that he trusted God. Thus he was in the right. It all added up. Grace is gift; being among the covenant people is gift; it is not a wage given at the end of the day. Paul uses Psalm 32 to make the same point. God justifies the ungodly which is just what a human judge should not do according to scripture. But God does and that is amazing and both Abraham and David witness to it.

In 4.9–12 Paul now sharpens the question of 4.1. Does the covenant of Abraham apply only to Jews or to Gentiles also? Should Gentiles be circumcised? Paul’s argument is clear; the family of faith does not have to regard Abraham as its physical progenitor. Abraham was justified freely by grace without works as was the sinful David. Paul is saying more than just that Abraham is an example but is the foundation of who God is and who the people of God are.

If God’s promise is not just to those who are circumcised then it is not confined to those who have the Torah (13–15). The Torah comes later than the promise and cannot annul it. Paul’s view that the law brings wrath needs to be linked with 3.19–20. The argument is that the law shows up sin (remember the discussion in Study One) in ethnic Israel and sin evokes wrath (judgment) just as breaking the law does in ordinary human experience. Therefore, if the inheritance is confined to ethnic Israel no-one would inherit the promise.

Verses 16–17 bring this section of the argument to a close. Abraham did not receive the promise through the law but through faith; indeed, if law is the criteria then the whole business is void. Abraham's faith is the sole badge of membership in the people of God and everyone who shares that faith God justifies. Such faith is the same as that exercised by those who believe in the God who raised Jesus from the dead (see 23–25). If you want to see what Paul is arguing against read Sirach 44.19–21 found in the Apocrypha a common read among Paul's opponents. The key line is "He [Abraham] kept the Law of the Most High" i.e. the law of Moses. The simple fact is he did not and that is Paul's argument.

Questions: Do you rejoice in God's good grace? We live in a merit-based world. How do you feel about Paul's notions of grace and the nature of God who forgives the sinner? Is our mission to act as moral police? How does Paul's argument help us answer that question?

John 3.1–17

³Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, '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.' ³Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' ⁴Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' ⁵Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' ⁹Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?'¹⁰Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

¹¹Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶For 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.

¹⁷Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

What a rich text, full of word play, misunderstanding, irony and metaphor in the dialogue. That makes it hard to reduce to a single theme or idea. The mixture of story, action and dialogue pre-empts such simplification. One such a common simplification

is to boil it down to being a text about “being born again” an idea that seems to frighten a lot of people because of its North American associations of individual private conversion that sets people above others, giving them a privileged status and quick entry to heaven.

Questions: Do you have any prejudices about the subject of being born again? Can you name them and explore them? Can you put them on hold as you read this dialogue?

The two main actors meet. The scene is set at night and the two characters are introduced (1–2a). Jesus is in Jerusalem (2.13) and here he meets Nicodemus, a Pharisee and ruler of the Jews. We will meet these folk throughout the Gospel of John as they constitute Jesus’ most dangerous enemy. Notice he uses “we know” as though he is representing someone or somebody.

We have already been told that Jesus brings light in darkness (1.4,5,9) as the creative Word of God. Nicodemus is a Pharisee and a leader moving in darkness towards the light found in Jesus, taking the first steps towards believing.

Questions: Who do you think Nicodemus is representing as “we”? Who does Nicodemus think Jesus is and why? Where has that information come from (2.23–25)?

Jesus engages Nicodemus

The dialogue now proceeds between Jesus and Nicodemus (2b-12) with Nicodemus accepting a good deal of the witness to Jesus in chapters 1–2 of John such as ‘Rabbi’ and ‘sign worker’ but adds a further understanding that the Jesus comes from the presence of God, a dignity reserved for the great figures of Israel’s history, like Moses or Jeremiah. This is as far as Nicodemus can get because he is still defining Jesus in terms he understands. Nicodemus is not hostile like some of his compatriots and colleagues (2.18–22) but confined by his frameworks. Jesus is new and Nicodemus is trying to fit him into the well-worn categories of those who know best, like Law, Sabbath and Temple. But it is a start and Jesus takes him at his word and as a genuine seeker of enlightenment.

Questions: We all live and judge within categories accepted in our group and society. We might think of ourselves as say, progressives or conservatives, then set about interpreting the world through the inherited and assumed characteristics of that group. What are your lenses though which you view the world and the people in it? Reflect on how you might try and trap Jesus in your known categories in your own life? How does that affect our mission to be Christ-like and bring blessing to the world?

Jesus builds on Nicodemus’ tentative positive approach but immediately takes him out of his preconceived sets of ideas (3.3–8). The critical words of 3.3 need to be read in

the light of the incredulous response of 3.4 and the real possibility of misreading Jesus and Jesus' response in 3.5–8.

“Very truly, I tell you, no-one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

It is this response that sparks the dialogue and puts Nicodemus in a very uncomfortable position. The word ‘above’ in the NRSV has two meanings, ‘above’ and ‘again’ and John uses the ambiguity in this word to express his ideas. Nicodemus thinks of the horizontal meaning; birth from the womb. Nicodemus was familiar with the idea of God as king (the kingdom of God) but had some fixed ideas about how God’s kingship worked and who were the subjects of it. They were centred in Law, Temple, Land and a special People. But to think that there was another way to “see” (participate in, live in the light of) God’s sovereign rule was beyond his imagination.

Jesus’ imagery produces incredulity and Nicodemus’ response spells his utter confusion. And any reader can identify with him. Why wouldn’t he identify what Jesus has said with birth from a mother’s womb?

So, Jesus takes him on a mind-blowing journey.

“Very truly, I tell you, no-one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit.”

Questions: What has changed in Jesus’ response? Why do you think that might be?

Jesus is talking about a radical restart in the kingdom. Entering or sharing in the life of that sovereign rule of God, all its beauty, mercy love and justice is not about Law, Temple, Land and special People.

John’s use of water and the Spirit indicates what he understands by the conversion experience; baptism that accepts the coming judgment and salvation of God and the renewal of the world by the creator Spirit. Jesus is telling Nicodemus that a new world order is beginning and to be part of it required a radical reorientation (5).

So radical is this reworking that Nicodemus has to let go of all that he thinks he knows and start all over (6–8). The birth image is very confronting. It says, ‘You know nothing and you understand nothing. Your religion and spirituality has led you up the garden path. Go back and start again. Start with the Spirit of the crucified One (11–15).’

Nicodemus did not expect such a confrontation. To be born from above has only one source, Jesus’ outpouring of his own life. The only way to the promised kingdom, to eternal life (John’s preferred and equivalent term for the kingdom), comes from above into the world only to be lifted up from the world in derision and suffering. This is the moment of being born again, from above.

The saving love of God is the driving force of the mystery of the lifting up of the Son (16–17) who brings the possibility of God’s life to the world in salvation. Judgment is not God’s final word; salvation is (see 1.12–13). The time of judgment is now as Nicodemus is faced with the revelation of the Father’s love in the Son; the choice is between light and darkness (19–20). Will Nicodemus step into the light?

Questions; What is your response when Jesus takes you beyond what you know or challenges your long-held beliefs or wisdom? What does the revelation of the father’s love in the Son mean to you? How can we share that love?

See if you can link Abraham and Sarah, the psalmist, Paul and Jesus and Nicodemus then find clues about what God is up to and what that might mean for us.