

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT
MARCH 5, 2023
GENESIS 12:1-4A



“CALLED TO GO”

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***CALL TO WORSHIP:**

ONE: From the safety and comfort of home, God called Abram to go from all he knew to embrace a future yet to be revealed.

All: “Go from,” God says, and our hesitant hearts place one foot in front of the other to trust God with the unknown.

ONE: By night, Nicodemus came seeking greater insight into the teachings of God for the journey set before him. Jesus called him out of the shadows and towards a life born anew.

All: “Go towards” God says, and a new life awaits us. We reach towards a God who has not come to condemn the world but to offer a salve that can heal all wounds.

ONE: We fear the unknown and that which we lack in understanding. “How can this be?” we proclaim with Nicodemus. And yet, God’s call is one that urges us to go with our whole self into that unknowing, trusting that God will provide a way.

All: Love calls us forth into lives of transformation, born anew into new paths of faith. Though we do not know where we are going, God has promised to never leave us alone. Let us worship the One who will show us the way.

***PRAYER OF INVOCATION:**

God of calls and courage, you draw us towards your loving embrace even as we face what seems like impossibility. We experience heartache and grief, injustice and cruelty, fear and anxiety as daily teachers on this path of faith. As you call us to go into an uncertain and unknown future, O God, grant us the courage needed to let go of all that we have known so that we can take hold of the new life you are bringing about even now. Though we may not know where we are going, God, your way is revealed moment by

moment, step by step, and breath by breath. In the name of the One who so loves the world we pray. Amen.

***PRAYER FOR TRANSFORMATION AND NEW LIFE:**

Liturgist: O God, we all too often wish to go our own way, maintain control, and rely on our own strength rather than trust that you will provide. Forgive us in our unwillingness to live by faith or to not trust you with providing all that we need for the journey.

All: May God's mercy surround our weaknesses with grace for restoring us to hope everlasting.

***WORDS OF GRACE/ASSURANCE OF GOD'S LOVE:**

Friends, the call of God does not leave us isolated and condemned on a road of uncertainty, fear, and mistakes made. God's unending love and compassion is for all whose burdens are heavy and whose weary journey brings tears. May the tender arms of God carry you forth in strength.

All: God has not come to condemn, but to offer a healing salve for our wounds. We welcome God's healing and salvation through Jesus Christ. Amen.

FIRST TESTAMENT READING: Genesis 12:1-4a

Abram's family moves to Canaan

12 The LORD said to Abram, "Leave your land, your family, and your father's household for the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation and will bless you. I will make your name respected, and you will be a blessing.

³I will bless those who bless you,
those who curse you I will curse;

all the families of the earth
will be blessed because of you."

⁴Abram left just as the LORD told him, and Lot went with him. Now Abram was 75 years old when he left Haran.

EPISTLE READING: Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

Abraham's faith was credited as righteousness

4 So what are we going to say? Are we going to find that Abraham is our ancestor on the basis of genealogy? ²Because if Abraham was made righteous because of his actions, he would have had a reason to brag, but not in front of God. ³What does the scripture say? *Abraham had faith in God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.* ⁴Workers' salaries aren't credited to them on the basis of an employer's grace but rather on the basis of what they deserve. ⁵But faith is credited as righteousness to those who don't work, because they have faith in God who makes the ungodly righteous.

¹³The promise to Abraham and to his descendants, that he would inherit the world, didn't come through the Law but through the righteousness that comes from faith. ¹⁴If they inherit because of the Law, then faith has no effect and the promise has been canceled. ¹⁵The Law brings about wrath. But when there isn't any law, there isn't any violation of the law. ¹⁶That's why the inheritance comes through faith, so that it will be on the basis of God's grace. In that way, the promise is secure for all of Abraham's descendants, not just for those who are related by Law but also for those who are related by the faith of Abraham, who is the father of all of us. ¹⁷As it is written: *I have appointed you to be the father of many nations.* So Abraham is our father in the eyes of

God in whom he had faith, the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that don't exist into existence.

***GOSPEL LESSON: John 3:1-17**

Jesus and Nicodemus

3 There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a Jewish leader. ² He came to Jesus at night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him."

³ Jesus answered, "I assure you, unless someone is born anew, it's not possible to see God's kingdom."⁴ Nicodemus asked, "How is it possible for an adult to be born? It's impossible to enter the mother's womb for a second time and be born, isn't it?"

⁵ Jesus answered, "I assure you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, it's not possible to enter God's kingdom. ⁶ Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Don't be surprised that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.' ⁸ God's Spirit blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. It's the same with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

⁹ Nicodemus said, "How are these things possible?"

¹⁰ "Jesus answered, "You are a teacher of Israel and you don't know these things? ¹¹ I assure you that we speak about what we know and testify about what we have seen, but you don't receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you don't believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has

gone up to heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Human One. ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One be lifted up ¹⁵ so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. ¹⁶ God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life. ¹⁷ God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

MESSAGE: "What does it mean?"

Every time I read this scripture text, I scratch my head. I don't understand it. Some of the problem are the Greek words. And some of it is because of the "terms"; ways of speaking that we don't use at the present time. Some of the problem is because of the way Jesus talks to Nicodemus. How do we interpret this interchange between Nicodemus and Jesus? Jesus seems so tart. Almost rude. He doesn't mince words. He tells it like it is. I've always pictured Jesus as being sweet and gentle, and trying not to insult people. But I guess I was wrong.

Nicodemus begins this encounter by recognizing that Jesus is a "Rabbi", a teacher, however he misunderstands what it means for Jesus to be "from God." Nicodemus grounds his beliefs about Jesus based on the signs, healings, and miracles that Jesus is doing. Jesus corrects him by saying "signs are not enough."

Nicodemus's clear misunderstanding of Jesus suggests a literal interpretation of "born again." The Greek word *anōthen* can be translated "again, anew, from above." This is perhaps one of the most well-known and misused verses

in the Bible – what “born again” means. Jesus is saying that “born again” is a one-dimensional possibility for salvation. What *anóthen* can imply suggests a three-dimensional reality that incorporates all three meanings. This is critical when it comes to the possible ways to understand Jesus’ response to Nicodemus’s misunderstanding. Too often verse 3:5 is interpreted through the lens of baptism alone. While the reference to water and Spirit certainly has baptismal overtones, the specific terms of water and Spirit have deep significance when one takes into account the entirety of the Gospel. Jesus is the provider of living water, to the Samaritan women first. He will again reveal that he is the source of water, a basic need for the sustaining of life, in chapters 7-8. Water has to do with sustenance and nurture and what is essential to live.

The same is true of the mention of the Spirit. The reference to the Spirit here needs to be situated within the larger portrayal of the Spirit’s activity and character according to the author of the Gospel of John. The author’s explanation of the Spirit can be seen in the Farewell Discourse as the “paraclete”. We can also read in 20:22 when Jesus gives the gift of the Spirit to the disciples. Jesus breathes into them the Spirit. The verb in 20:22 is *emphysao*, the same verb that is used in Genesis 2:7 for God breathing God’s very breath in Adam. As a result, the reference to the Spirit here in 3:5 is not just about baptism, but literally about becoming a child of God, a new creation, a new created identity, rebirth, that encompasses being born again, anew, and from above.

(Now this makes more sense to me. When we realize and accept that we are children of God, we have new breath

blown into us and we are a new person. In the Genesis reading today Abram and Sarai are giving the opportunity to become new people in God’s world.)

The final words of Nicodemus in this dialogue can be the very question from where we started, “how can these things be?” As we read and study more of God’s words, we can see how Jesus’ reality can be ours. When we change our hearts and minds to God’s will, we are becoming a new person, (again, anew, from above, born again). And this is possible through Jesus Christ. That’s “how these things can be.” Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER: Beginning with silent personal prayer: You are great, O God; for there is no one like you, and there is no God besides you, according to all that we have heard with our ears. Because of your promises, and according to your own heart, you have brought us salvation in Jesus Christ and called us as new people to share the good news with all the world.

Bless and add to your church those who are coming to themselves and returning to the home of their parents in the faith. Pour your water of life on the thirsty land, and stream so the dry ground. Pour your Spirit upon all of us as your children and give blessings to your offspring. Call your people to more constant prayer, more fervent faith, and such confidence in you that the coming of your rule may not be delayed by half-heartedness.

Bless this land we love despite its faults. Sustain our government leaders in administering just laws and governing us with wisdom and integrity.

Compassionate Christ, comfort your children who are faint from the struggle with the ailments and adversities of

our mortal life; speak tenderly to those who mourn. We especially pray for all those on our prayer list, especially all those who have had procedures and surgeries this week.

God of the ages, source of all life, we thank you for sending your true and faithful servants around the world to help others in need after disasters, such as the earthquake in Syria and Turkey, the train wreck in Greece, the tornadoes in Oklahoma, mud slides in California, blizzards in the northeast, and all those victims of violence in our cities and around the world.

To you, O God, we ascribe all glory and praise time without end, as we pray together the prayer your Son taught us. . .

LORD'S PRAYER:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

INVITATION TO GENEROSITY:

Gracious and Giving God, you have called us to give of our resources so that others may experience the new life you are inviting us into. Let our gifts be for the birthing of new life in our local community, in the global community, and in our faith community. In the name of Jesus the Christ we pray. Amen.

***PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING AND DEDICATION:**

O God who calls us to go out into the world with generosity,

may these gifts call us from our lives of comfort and towards a faith journey that embraces your love, justice, and compassion for a world in need of your healing. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

***HOLY COMMUNION:**

May the God of great adventures be with you!

And also with you!

It is God who is able to keep our hearts filled with hope and peace.

We will offer our hearts to the One who is our Keeper.

Trust in the promises whose fulfillment we cannot see.

We lift our songs to the One who is always with us.

You went into the shadows of nothingness, bearing your Light of creation, Keeper of all, so that life might burst forth where there was none: white sands at the edge of blue green seas, shale formed under the crust of the earth, warm mornings and frigid nights to mark the seasons.

You blessed your children with creation's gifts so we might prove to be a blessing to others, but we watched the comings and goings of sin and death, allowing ourselves to be blown about by them. Prophets responded to your call to them, daring to bring us those words we did not want to hear, calling us back to a way of life we had abandoned, but we knew that we preferred life in the absence of your presence.

For this reason, you sent Jesus into the world, so that we, along with all creation, might be saved.

With those who toss and turn in the night,

with those who have responded to your call,
we lift our thanksgivings to you:

Holy, holy, holy are you, Who neither slumbers nor sleeps.

All creation blesses your glorious name.

Hosanna in the highest!

Blessed is the One who comes to answer our questions.

Hosanna in the highest!

Holy One, you are the God of blessings, and Jesus Christ is your Faithful One. The One who could truly boast, he humbled himself to become like us. The One who was truly righteous, he emptied himself to fill us with grace.

The One who had spoken life into existence, he embraced death on the cross, so that we might be justified through your grace and wonder.

As we continue on the journey to Jerusalem,
as we seek to leave our comfortable lives to follow,
we would talk about that mystery we call faith:

Christ died, faithful to the end;

Christ was raised, so all creation might be saved;

Christ will come, to bring us to that home he will show us.

What then are we to say, Keeper of our lives? It is your Spirit poured out upon us and upon the gifts of the Table which brings us new life. It is the brokenness of the bread which gives us life, that life poured out for those who have no hope, for those who wander in the shadows.

It is the grace of the cup which overflows with your gifts, so we might go to be a blessing to all forsaken by the world.

And when our journey has ended and we find ourselves in that land which you have prepared for us, we will sing our glad songs to you forever, Amen.

SHARING THE ELEMENTS

***PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING:** Eternal God, we thank you for your presence in the simplicity and splendor of this holy meal. By the power of your Holy Spirit, unite us with all whom Christ welcomes, that we may be the servant church of the servant Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

***BENEDICTION:**

Friends, go forth with the courage of God to guide you into those places of restlessness and uncertainty.

For we are called to go...

From our places of comfort.

From our certainties and complacency.

From our old life and into the new.

May the call of God not just call us from but toward a love so compelling that we are willing to trust our whole self into the embrace of the Creator, into the abiding love of Christ, and into the sacred dance of the Holy Spirit. We go forth in the peace of Christ. Amen!