

## Second Sunday in Lent

*Genesis 12:1-4a*

*Romans 4:1-5, 13-17*

*John 3:1-17*

During the season of Lent, many of us wrestle with what to "give up" or what to "take on" as part of our customary spiritual discipline. Now granted, being a parish in transition might well include taking *on* new leadership roles or giving *up* certainty about what to expect on any given Sunday! Still, *whatever* we decide to do or not to do, we can be mindful that Lent is a time for change, for moving from where we are, closer to where God longs us to be. Our real question to ponder is, very simply: do we trust God enough, to let go and allow ourselves to be changed into something new? Can we trust God enough, to open ourselves to the blessings promised us if we do?

In our first reading, Abram heard this invitation from God to move from all that was familiar into new life. "*Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you,*" God said to him. And Abram went, taking everything he owned except for a map, because there wasn't one. God's voice was the only map he had, and he and his wife Sarai learned to live by it. They learned to recognize the tug in their hearts when it nudged. And they learned to follow its lead without *having* to know where or why or what. All they knew, is that they somehow would be blessed by doing so. The Apostle Paul later describes Abraham and Sarah's response as an act of faith and suggests that such a response is at the center of Christian belief. Moving from an old place to a new place in our spiritual lives is simply what those who belong to God do. Right? (*Easier said than done, perhaps?*)

In today's Gospel, Jesus describes this newness that happens through faith as being "born again" or "born from above". He invites Nicodemus to let go of what he knows in order to be reborn through the love Jesus has to offer. Nicodemus' response may be closer to our own realities. He gets stuck on semantics. He rationalizes with those oh, so familiar "yes-buts" – "how could a grown person be born a second time? Wouldn't he be too large for the womb? That just doesn't make any sense." It's not that Nicodemus was being faithless. He was just trapped in his own limited expectations; he wanted to hold on to the stuff of life that he already knew, that he could see and could control.

Unlike Abraham and Sarah, his response had more to do with what he thought he could make happen, rather than looking for God's presence at work in and through him. He was, in fact, expressing the underlying question that many of us have when confronted with change. Why should we even want to let go of the familiar and venture into this unknown, new way of life? You have heard Jesus' answer many times before - because, *God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that all who believed would have eternal life.* In what ways does that well known verse have meaning for you? By naming where he was stuck, Nicodemus became open to hear Jesus' answer differently. Can we? Try this on – (*adapted from The Shack*)

*Because*, you are precious in God's eyes and he loves you. Nothing in heaven or on earth can ever separate you from the love with which God now holds you. *Because*, you need not regret the past nor fear the future. Whether you are a success in the world's eyes or a failure, **you belong to God.** *Because*, whether you achieve all you hope for in life or few of your dreams come true, **you belong to God.** *Because*, whether you were born into a happy home or a troubled one, whether you've had a comfortable life or you've struggled all the way, whether you've been much loved or largely ignored, **you belong to God.** *Because*, you need not conform yourself to the opinions of others or struggle to win their approval, **you belong to God.** *Because*, you need not grasp for riches or fame or success or power in order to find meaning and purpose for

your live. **You belong to God.** *Because*, you need not be afraid of failing or falling or fumbling in life. **You belong to God.** *Because*, your name is carved in the palm of God's hand. God will never forget you, never abandon you, never leave you. **You belong to God.**

Letting *go* of all that blocks us from seeing ourselves and each other as God's beloved is the only change in our lives that Jesus ever asks us to make. Taking *on* God's love, rather than guilt or fear or shame or anxiety, is the real invitation of a holy Lent. This is a love that never ends, never fails, never abandons us. This is a love, and a real power in that presence, that has been promised – not based on what we do, rather based on whose we are. What we do is a result of whose we are, not the other way around. The God revealed in Jesus is a God whose love for us knows no bounds and whose promised blessings are ours to receive and to share. Granted, it is a hard thing to believe in a promise – to live by it, to be willing to be changed because of it. It is a hard thing to believe in a promise with no power of our own to make it come true. And yet, all we need to know and to believe, is that, somehow, we *will* be blessed by doing so.

Let us pray –

Holy God, be in our minds, that we might let go of all that diminishes the movement of your Spirit within us. Discerning God, be in our eyes, that we might see you in the midst of all the busy-ness that fills our lives. Loving God, be in our hearts, that we can be open to those we love, to those with whom we share ministry, and to the whole human family. Gracious God, be in that grace-filled silence that lies deep within us, that we might live in Christ as Christ lives in us. Surprising God, be in our listening, that we might discern the voice of Christ calling us into the mystery of the future, making of his music a song that becomes our own.

*Humbly offered – The Rev. Dr. Lisa D. Hahneman*