

## **Born from Above -- Lent 2A**

We open our inquiry at a pivotal spot. As scholars have pointed out, the story of the call of Abram is the key transition in the entire Book of Genesis. Chapters 1-11 comprise the primeval history: the establishment of the circumstances of life for all Creation. Those stories are full of myths that were already ancient when they were written down, long before the cult of YHWH took root amongst the Hebrew people. They concern things that happened long, long ago and far, far way; but who knows where or when? Today's passage begins the other major unit of Genesis, in which the stories focus on family matters among our own direct spiritual ancestors in times and places we can identify. This is the beginning of The Bible as an historical document.

Up to this point, the biblical stories treat justice as a function of human sin, beginning with the first couple and their fratricidal offspring. We have the report of the Flood as divine judgment on human corruption, and the chaotic dispersal of the nations at Babel. But with Genesis 12, the story becomes a history of salvation instead of sin. Quite without explanation, Yahweh calls a particular individual, Abram, who will come to be called Abraham, and instructs him to leave his homeland and set out to a strange place. The story is about a man, of course only because as we know, the males were in charge of the writing of the books; they had custody of the community's memory. From the depths of his faith in a greater good than humanity can imagine, a faith he calls God, Abram hears the invitation to a new life. Because of this, it is said he is born from above. He is now Abraham. Subsequently, any one of us can be

born anew -- from above, as it were -- when our physical birth with its geographical location is followed by a spiritual one with a theological location of its own. The movement is symbolized by Abraham's following directions by changing his, and his family's location. It is an external manifestation of an internal process. We are meant to have such a conversion ourselves, resulting in a metaphorical move. The Bible is not telling us to go out and beat up on some Canaanites. But the Bible is telling us that sometimes people have to move: migrate, emigrate, immigrate, etc. To pretend otherwise is, at best unrealistic; at worst ungodly. According to Genesis.

Turning to Nicodemus; he has a point. "What does that even mean, 'born again' ... how can these things be?" In truth, the clues to Jesus' meaning are plentiful. They reach all the way back to the beginning of this book of books. Today's readings only steer our attention away from older, more simplistic theories and stories about sinfulness and transgression to mindful, conscious examples of human faith and divine faithfulness: that is to say, stories of God's promises and human responses to those promises. The second birth Jesus wants us to experience is the story of our response to the grace of God.

We hear the call to Abram, the first of the Patriarchs, and his willing response: "Abram took his wife Sarai, all the possessions they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and set forth to go to the land of Canaan. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord said, "To your offspring I will give this land."

It is worth pausing for a moment here to reiterate the importance of ongoing biblical interpretation. The story says our patriarch travelled with slaves to a far-off country because God told him he could have it for his family. Of course there were Canaanites living there, it was Canaan. The same exact thing happened in this land of ours, much more recently. God help us, we are no longer under the impression that acquiring persons to do our work, and displacing persons from their land so we can have it are good and just ways of behaving. Abram's may be a perfect example of good faith for us, but his ethics have proven obsolete. The Canaanites would presumably have made a few other suggestions for his homesteading plans; likewise the Arapahoe, the Choctaw and the Cree. Here endeth the digression.

We hear St. Paul's illumination of this story as he points out that Abram's faith, rather than his action is what God values in the exchange. As yet, no laws have been explicated to be broken or obeyed. What's at stake is the personal spiritual nourishment of the faithful; whether to be fed by obeisance or starved by defiance. In simpler terms, happiness is contingent upon godliness. Abram does what he hears God telling him to do because he thinks it will make him and his family happy. This idea is characterized as a promise made by the One who will subdue all our foes and fill us with honey from the rock if only we will heed. Sometimes the heeding can feel pretty risky and uncomfortable, but, like Abraham, we gotta stick with it.

In his letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul reminds that Abraham's relationship with God is based on trust alone, not privilege. Such a promise of happiness as God makes is never bound by genealogy. Now, it has become clear that anyone can manifest trust in God by obedience and thus, be counted just as righteous as Abraham. And because of the variety of human culture, trust is not demonstrated by adherence to certain laws, but depends instead on the attitude and commitment of the faithful.

In his essay, "The Deepest Self," columnist David Brooks takes a more metallic view of this phenomenon: "Yes, we originate with certain biological predispositions, but our depth, the core of our being is something we cultivate over time. We begin with natural biases but carve out our depths according to the quality of the commitments we make. Much of what we call depth is built through freely chosen suffering. People make commitments — to a nation, a faith, a calling or to our loved ones — and endure the sacrifices those commitments demand. Much of our understanding occurs later in life, amid joy and suffering. Theologian Paul Tillich wrote that during moments of suffering, people discover they are not what they appeared to be. The suffering scours away a floor inside themselves, exposing a deeper level; then that gets scoured away too." We are continually being born again when we welcome the floor-scouring, heart-opening risks that Jesus demands. As Santa Theresa is said to have prayed, "Lord, either let me suffer or let me die."

The result for Abraham, and for us, is this: If we trust in God's goodness; if we take the risk of facing our sorrows,

becoming acquainted with our grief and starting to love anew, we will know a deeper happiness. “And I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.” What can make us such a blessing that in us all the families of the earth are blessed? Perhaps we are blessed when in wide-eyed wonderment we embrace and give thanks for each day’s newborn opportunities to gain in wisdom. Perhaps our names become great when everyone who hears of us gets a sense of living justice and love. It doesn’t matter whether there are a billion people or only a couple dozen who know our name, our name is great to them if it has the sound of peace. To each of them we will be a blessing. And blessings are permanent. There is no witchcraft; curses wither and fall empty. But true blessings are forever.

As the poet begs:

Let each year bring you Wisdom’s kiss  
To guide you through life’s thoughtless bliss  
Now treasure her in fullest bloom  
Against the fall to ageless doom  
The mindful and the wise must know  
They are the blessings God bestows