

Lent 2 March 5 2023

Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17

What is faith? Trust? A relationship? Belief- knowledge?

Listen to the readings for today and you see how scripture and these early followers of Jesus define faith. There are different emphasis, but I would argue they all have one thing in common.

This relationship with God is not one that we come to on our own. That we initiate. From the beginning, the relationship has always originated with God. It relies on the grace of God who comes to us. We could talk Adam (created and given life by the ruach, the breath, the spirit of God), but we'll go to the first Jew. Abram. God comes to Abram- not the other way around. Abram is just minding his own business, content with his life and God basically says to Abram, you're my guy. Get up, grab your family, and get moving. I'll tell you when to stop. What does he do? Abram's response is one of faith, trust in the one who made that claim, that call to him. But it isn't like Abram was the one who controlled the relationship. Certainly, he didn't start it.

And Paul points out that what puts Abram into right relationship with God- defined in the Hebrew Scriptures as being righteous- is not what he does, but that he has faith. He trusts in this relationship that God establishes. Now, that faith is expressed in action. He packs his bags and moves. He trusts (imperfectly) that God will make of him more descendants than the stars. But it is resting in the

relationship that God graciously started that puts him in right relationship with God. That is faith.

Now, Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus shows both how we humans tend to think things roll with God, and, once again, how they really roll.

Nick let's Jesus know that him and his friends (the Pharisees- a group of Jews who believed in strict observance of the Laws in the Bible as the way to be in right relationship with God- to be righteous). Nick believes he and the other Pharisees have the ability, the power, to discern that Jesus must be a teacher who has come from God because no one has the power to do the signs Jesus has done apart from God. Their knowledge of scripture allows them to figure this out. They can know who Jesus really is. You can almost hear the amused tone in Jesus. "You think you know this, do you? That you have discerned the truth of who and what I am? "

"Nope. See, the only way to see the reign of God is to be born from above." Nick, can't understand what Jesus is saying, the Greek is a bit ambiguous, (higher place, beginning, anew) so he takes him literally in a way that makes sense to Nicodemus... "Born again? I can't crawl back into the womb. How does that work?"

Jesus tries again. "No Nick, not born again, but born from above. You don't have the power to enter the reign of God without first being born of water and the Spirit." This could mean a lot of things, but what do you first think of when you

hear that? Baptism, a claiming by God of another who is beloved child. God's gracious initiation of relationship. No prerequisites. Then you will be able to know and to see because that ability will be given to you.

Nick continues to be confused, because what Jesus is saying is outside of how he sees the world. Your relationship with God is controlled by you. You initiate. You keep it active. You end it. But that's not it at all.

Nick's problem is related to the sin that led Adam and Eve to disobey. Thinking that we can know what God knows. That we can/are in control of things. Nope.

Paul makes it clear. Abraham is in right relationship with God, righteous, even before he leaves his homeland. Righteous in that moment following God's claim of relationship- you're my guy- and before saying, "Yep, I'm packing my bags."

What puts us in right relationship with God is that almost instinctual trust in God's call. That the relationship exists because God says it does.

And what does this relationship mean?

The psalmist describes it so eloquently. When I am in trouble, my help, comes from the one who made all that exists. God is the one who will not let my foot be moved. It reminds me of a parent holding their child's foot on the ladder so they won't fall. God is always watching over us- God doesn't take a break from that. God shades, preserves, protects us from the worst of what the world will throw at us. And this is 24/7 coverage in a way that not even Ring or ADT can claim. God

watches our going out and our coming in, our lying down and our rising. From the moment of God's claim on us until...

What is the character of this God who claims us? Jesus makes it clear. God so loved the world. Can you believe that? God so love America in 2023. Russia and Ukraine. God so loved Germany in 1939. God so loved Hiroshima in 1945. God so loved Pol Pot and Stalin. God so loved this broken, messy, wonderful world that God sent Jesus, God's only Son, into the world not to condemn it. To wag the divine finger, rain down fire and brimstone, hit ctrl/alt/delete. But in order to make the world- literally the cosmos- whole again through him. Through Jesus.

Once again, the saving activity and grace, what saves us from ourselves, is God's alone. I don't know about you, but that is a relief to me.

Now, as all the Gospels and even Paul remind us, that claim and the faith that comes from that relationship does lead to action. We live differently because God has claimed us through water and the Spirit. We live differently because God has come to us and said, you're mine. I choose you. Because God loves us. We know what that looks like. Ever change how you live because you love someone? The movies you watch. The food you eat. The things you do in your free time?

We live differently after this choosing by God because now we can see, have entered the reign of God, the reign of heaven. Because we see the world through different eyes. With God's vision. We love the world and do not condemn it, but

strive to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world through whom it will be made whole.

We do so imperfectly, like Abram. He and Sarah got impatient for God to fulfill God's promise, that's why we have Ishmael. We sometimes think we are solely responsible and in control of this relationship. Like the Pharisees. And at other times think that our citizenship in the reign of God requires nothing of us. That it is all privilege with no responsibility. We let our eyes be taken off the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world and captured by the latest electronic bauble that leads us into an inconsequential time suck for the sake of making money we can't take with us anyway.

And so we repent. Change our thinking. Dip again into the waters of baptism and feel the breath of the Spirit on our face. And renewed, come again to the feet of Jesus on the Mount. Hear again the truth, God has claimed you as God's beloved child with whom God is well pleased. Bear that name proudly into the world and honor it with who you are. With how you live and speak. Proclaiming the truth of God's unending love for this world that God called into existence. And that in Jesus, God's son, we have shalom. Peace. Wholeness. Life that truly is life. Fuller and more abundant. Not because of anything we have done, but because of what God has done.

We, our world, is in desperate need of this message. This kind of faith. Of people who are humble before God, but bold in their proclamation of God's message. People who acknowledge their imperfections, and trust that in Jesus they are

made perfect in the eyes of God. People who strive to love God and love one another with the same wild abandon that God does. People like you. God's beloved, with whom God is well pleased. Thanks be to God.