**Weekend of Sunday, March 5, 2022**

**2nd Sunday in Lent/Year A**

**First Reading: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7**

**Second Reading: Romans 5:12-19**

**Gospel Reading: John 3:1-17**

***“Born Anew Through Faith”***

**Theme**

*During Lent we journey with all those around the world who will be baptized at the Easter Vigil. In today’s gospel Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born of water and Spirit. At the font we are a given a new birth as children of God. As God made a covenant with Abraham, in baptism God promises to raise us up with Christ to new life. From worship we are sent forth to proclaim God’s love for all the world.*

**Texts:**

**First Reading: Genesis 12:1-4a**

1The 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.”
 4aSo Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him.

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

1What 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.
 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.

**Gospel: John 3:1-17**

1Now 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?
 11“Very 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.
 16“For 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.
 17“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

**Sermon**

Our lectionary readings for this morning begin about as far back as they can; Genesis 12. In this passage, the LORD makes a covenant with Abram, who will soon be renamed Abraham. This covenant is known as the Abrahamic Covenant and the covenant includes land and heirs, which are important to Abram and his wife Sarai because he is both a wandering Aramean and childless. However, Abram's part of the covenant is that he has to leave everything he knows; family and friends, land and country, for a place the LORD will show him. In every community I have lived in, I find people that have never lived anywhere else. If you can relate, then the covenant and command of the LORD might have just given you shivers.

Back in the spring of 1981, I was about to graduate from Tri-State University and I had interviewed with Parker Hannifin on campus. The personnel manager liked me enough to give me a second interview at the division headquarters in Chicago. I went and they liked me enough to offer me a job right there on the spot. I think the personnel manager expected me to make a decision right then on the spot too. The financial offer was good, but I had never heard of the place I was going to be assigned; Sebring, Ohio. I asked for some time so that I could go and see this place I was being asked to move to.

And it was not just me who would be making the move. I knew that once I could provide for her, I was going to ask Carol to marry me. Of course, when I did, she said yes. But when I think about it, her saying yes, was really an act of faith. She knew me pretty well, but as far as a future with me, she *knew* nothing.

That weekend after the job was offered, I collected Carol and we made the drive to Sebring, Ohio. No matter what your opinion of Sebring is today, neither one of us was impressed back then, and yet I accepted the job offer, and together, Carol and I committed, in faith, I would argue, to beginning our life together in that little town just about twenty-five miles southwest of here. That began our vagabond life, and though the journey has not been without its challenges, we are still loving each other and loving our life together forty-two years later.

I tell you that story because, speaking for Carol and myself, we can relate to Abram's dilemma to some degree. At least we knew where we were going and had the opportunity to lay eyes on it.

The LORD didn't ask, nor do I sense that the LORD commanded, Abram was simply told to pack up everything and go to an unknown place, one that the LORD had not yet been revealed. "I'll show you," said the LORD. "Just have faith," is implied.

Only a little later in chapter 12, we learn that:

5Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, … and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, 6bAt that time the Canaanites were in the land. 7Then the LORD appeared to Abram, and said, "To your offspring I will give this land."

Now, I supplied this text for you for three reasons: 1) I told those of you in attendance at Wednesday's Lenten presentation, that "Canaan" was a better name for what is known as "Israel" today, and 2) that the Canaanites that lived there before Abram arrived are the same people that are known as the Palestinians today, and 3) to point out that in verse 7, the LORD did indeed make good on the land part of the Abrahamic Covenant.

In the Second Reading from Paul's letter to the Romans, he also addressed God's big ask of Abram, now Abraham. The question Paul asks, which is at the heart of this passage is this: Did the LORD's covenant with Abram make it so? Paul's answer was "no." What made the covenant efficacious was Abraham's faith in God.

1What 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.”

In other words, the only thing that Abraham brought to the covenant was his faith that God would come through.

Now, I feel I need to say that Abraham had a covenant with God about which he had faith in God that God would deliver. This is different than the theology of glory espoused by some that teach if you just believe hard enough that God wants you to win the lottery, you will. Paul very clearly writes, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.”

Moving on to the Gospel Reading, I suspect that for some time, you are going to have to endure me relating everything to my recent holy land pilgrimage.

Map

The context of our Gospel Reading from John is Jesus's first pilgrimage to Jerusalem since he inaugurated his public ministry. At the beginning of John 2, Jesus was in Cana in Galilee, then, by verse 12, he went to Capernaum. But then, beginning in verse 13, John wrote that Jesus went to Jerusalem because the Passover was near, and that is where he encountered Nicodemus.

In this passage, we read about the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus, a religious leader who sought to understand the teachings of Jesus. Jesus tells Nicodemus that to fully understand the kingdom of God, he must be "born anew from above" which Nicodemus misunderstands as physically being "born again." Nicodemus is confused by this and if we try to ignore our familiarity with this passage, I think we can understand why.

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?”

It's not a bad question. It's just the wrong question!

Jesus responds by explaining that this rebirth he is speaking of is not a physical one, but a spiritual one. He must be born anew through faith! And he further tells Nicodemus that this spiritual rebirth is necessary to believe in him, *have faith in him*, and the benefit of faith in him is eternal life. In the same way that Abraham had to have faith that LORD was going to make good on the covenant the LORD had made, Nicodemus had to be born anew, and have a spiritual rebirth, so that he could begin to have faith in Jesus.

This passage is a powerful reminder that faith in Jesus is not just a matter of intellectual understanding, but of true spiritual transformation. Just as a newborn baby is completely dependent on its parents for survival, so too must we rely completely on Jesus for salvation which is eternal life. And all this will be accomplished through the sacrifice he's going to make on the cross, which will be a demonstration of that love, which is the revelation of God's love for the world.

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

This passage calls us to let go of our own understanding and surrender ourselves completely to the love of Jesus. We must put our faith in him and allow him to transform us from the inside out. When we do this, we will experience the truth of Jesus' words: that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Let's strive to follow this passage, in our hearts and in our actions, to put trust and faith in Jesus, embrace the love God has for us, and live a life guided by the spirit of truth.

**Prayer**

Loving God, help us to be attentive to your direction and leading. Give us courage to follow where you would have us go. But above all else, renew our faith and life in you so that we may believe in the one you sent who offers eternal life, your Son and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen