

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Genesis 12:1-4a

^{12:1} Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I 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."

^{4a} So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him.

Commentary

Today's Hebrew scripture lection, despite its brevity, marks one of the most significant events in God's salvation story—the call of Abram/Abraham. This was the beginning of a journey for one elderly, childless couple that has since come to signify an epic voyage for all humankind. God's call, God's promise, and Abram's "yes" set a new course for the relationship between Creator and created. To this foundational covenant we can trace the origins of three of the world's major faith traditions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—all having one father and mother (Abraham and Sarah) who were blessed by God to be a blessing to the nations. The actual call event is not detailed. Unlike Moses, who met God in a burning bush, Abram's encounter was conveyed without supernatural signs, without special effects. God simply spoke, and Abram obeyed. Without question, without hesitation, without needing to know God's name or credentials, or his ultimate destination, Abram and Sarah picked up their lives, and with their nephew Lot, he went as he had been told by God. What happened up to this point in his life was inconsequential; for from this moment on Abram's life truly began.

Reflection

What would it take for you to follow a call from God so totally?

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

^{4:1} What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? ² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³ For

what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." ⁴ Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. ⁵ But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. ¹³ For 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. ¹⁴ If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵ For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. ¹⁶ For 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, ¹⁷ as 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.

Commentary

Abraham was made righteous, Paul asserts, not because of his work, but through his faith. The believing itself, however, should not be interpreted as Abraham's work, or the reason for his designation as righteous. Righteousness is not a reward for belief. Abraham is declared righteous through God's grace in response to—not because of—his faith. Righteousness is a gift only God can bestow. The section omitted from Chapter 4 focuses on the question of circumcision in regard to faith and righteousness. Abraham believed, and was reckoned as righteous, although as yet uncircumcised. Circumcision was the sign—the seal—of Abraham's righteousness. Abraham is the spiritual father of all who believe, but for Gentiles as well, he is father in faith, the model for the believer. It is God, not the believer, that "justifies the ungodly" (4:5) and makes right living possible.

Reflection

What is the difference between a Christian person and a good person? Does God accept all, or only those who believe and obey?

John 3:1-17

^{3:1} Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² He 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." ³ Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." ⁴ Nicodemus 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?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸ The 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." ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus 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. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that 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.

Commentary

Nicodemus provides a stark contrast to Abraham. Abraham believed God's promise and acted on it. Nicodemus, on the other hand, although a faithful and representative leader of the Jews, understood faith as the result of what he could discover and validate through investigation and deliberation. He had seen the verifiable evidence (through the miracles) that God was present in Jesus. Nicodemus' faith, tied to what he considered plausible, rendered him unable to grasp the fullness of God present in Jesus. Indeed, it would take another act of God for him to comprehend what Jesus was talking about. It is not enough to be born physically. To see the realm of God, one must be born "from above." The Greek *anothen* can mean "from above," "again," or "anew." Nicodemus interpreted it to mean "again." His literalism in regard to entering again into the womb further illustrates his reliance on tangible, observable facts. This pouring out of the Spirit "from above" (like Abraham's designation as righteous) cannot be accomplished through human action. Jesus could only know these heavenly things because he was from God. It was through his "lifting up" (crucifixion), resurrection, and ascension, that the work of the Spirit was made known to us.

Reflection

What has been your experience of new birth? Is it a one-time experience that you remember, or does the wind of the Spirit continue to blow in your life?

Responsive Psalter

from Psalm 121

^{121:1} I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?

² **My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.**

³ He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.

**⁴ He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.**

**⁵ The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade at your right hand.**

**⁶ The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.**

**⁷ The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.**

**⁸ The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore.**

Closing Prayer

**Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.**