

“New Adventures with God”

Genesis 12 1-4, Romans 4 1-5 & 13-17, John 3 1-17

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Lent is a celebration of God transforming us. We began our Lenten journey by acknowledging that we are mere dust, that we have life solely by God’s grace. We acknowledged that each of us are sinful and together we have made a mess of the cosmos. We celebrated that God freely, graciously forgives us. We acknowledge that our identity does not come from anything we do, or anything on earth, rather our identity comes solely from God, for we are God’s beloved children. God gives us gifts, abilities, love, joy and the Holy Spirit that enable us to overcome temptations and journey through the wilderness. As God’s beloved children we are assured that God is always with us, and God’s love will sustain, heal and transform us.

Today we are invited to let go of the past, the familiar, traditions, knowledge, certainties and let come new realms of transformation. In our scriptures today, faith is defined as the capacity to risk what is at hand for what is coming. A faithful person responds to God’s invitation to continually transform into a glorious, loving, joyful future. A faithful person let’s go of the past and embraces change.

Genesis 12:1-4 NLT “The Lord had said to Abram and Sarah, “Leave your native country, your relatives, and your parent’s family, and go to the land that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt. All the families on earth will be blessed through you.” So Abram and Sarah departed as the Lord had instructed, and Lot went with them. Abram was seventy-five years old when they left Haran.”

Seventy-five is not the typical time when you pack up your belongings, move to a new place, and start a brand-new life. In Abraham and Sarah’s nomadic society, it was a major goal to accumulate enough cattle and property to make the life of a nomad—wandering endlessly about—unnecessary. The idea was to get to a place where you never had to move again, never change anything again. So, the story is about two people who have reached this life goal, who have achieved stability, and when the voice of God tells them to get up and move, they don’t even have a clear destination. There will be a land and a great nation, but for now there’s just the two of them and the voice leading them into the unknown.

Walter Brueggemann says about the incident, "The command relates not only to geography. God invites Abraham and Sarah to embrace newness, to go where they have never been, to depart all familiar markings. This invitation makes people of faith habitually restless, ready to dare, trusting only in the promise of the One who speaks it. Faith is, indeed, the capacity to risk what is at hand for what is yet to be given."

Faith is being habitually restless, yearning for transformation. God is constantly inviting us to embrace newness, to depart from familiar thoughts, to think in ways we have never thought before. We are headed for the glorious Kingdom of God, to get there takes faith to risk what is at hand for what is coming.

Centuries later, when the Apostle Paul is trying to explain to new Christian believers what faith looks like, he points to Abraham and Sarah who believed God and it was reckoned to them as righteousness. You are righteous when you walk into a future based on the promises of God, a future full of newness, possibility, and hope. Righteous is not moral purity, not theological correctness, not following the law, rather righteousness is the courage to let go and let come.

Romans 4:1-5 & 13-17 “Abraham and Sarah were, humanly speaking, the founders of our Jewish nation. What did they discover about being made right with God? If their good deeds had made them acceptable to God, they would have had something to boast about. But that was not God’s way. For the Scriptures tell us, “Abraham and Sarah believed God, and God counted them as righteous because of their faith.” When people work, their wages are not a gift, but something they have earned. But people are counted as righteous, not because of their work, but because of their faith in God who forgives sinners. Clearly, God’s promise to give the whole earth to Abraham and Sarah and their descendants was based not on their obedience to God’s law, but on a right relationship with God that comes by faith. If God’s promise is only for those who obey the law, then faith is not necessary and the promise is pointless. For the law always brings punishment on those who try to obey it. (The only way to avoid breaking the

law is to have no law to break!) So the promise is received by faith. It is given as a free gift. And we are all certain to receive it, whether or not we live according to the law of Moses, if we have faith like Abraham's and Sarah's. For Abraham and Sarah are the parents of all who believe. That is what the Scriptures mean when God told them, "I have made you the parents of many nations." This happened because Abraham and Sarah believed in the God who brings the dead back to life and who creates new things out of nothing."

In the movie, *Dances with Wolves*, John Dunbar is transformed by learning a new language, learning new stories, and learning to tell his personal story in a new way. God invites us to learn a new language, the language of grace, to learn new stories, stories of God's joyful love for all of us and to tell our personal story in a new way, telling how God is loving in our daily life to transform us into glorious completeness.

Nicodemus knew the language of law, repentance, and sacrifice. Nicodemus knew the Old Testament stories. Nicodemus expressed his story as a religious leader who loved all people, cared for all people, was generous with all people, and was limited by the law in expressing that love to those outside of the temple and outside of the faith. Nicodemus was attracted to the love of Jesus, curious about his forgiveness of everyone, inquisitive regarding why Jesus freely healed people who were outsiders. Nicodemus is stuck for he wants to hold onto the old language, the old stories and the old ways of telling his story and he wants to be transformed. Nicodemus has the habitual restless of faith and is unsure about risking what is at hand for what is coming in Jesus. In Abraham and Sarah language, he is eager to go on daytrips with God but not yet ready to sell the homestead and venture whole heartedly into new lands.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. In the gospel of John, night symbolizes impaired spiritual sight. Nicodemus reveals spiritual sight for Nicodemus calls Jesus, Rabbi, honoring him with the title reserved for those learned in Torah and masterful teaching. Nicodemus is coming to Jesus to learn. Nicodemus acknowledges that Jesus' signs, good works, and miracles are from God. Nicodemus sees God in Jesus. Throughout the meeting of Nicodemus and Jesus, we hear the tension in Nicodemus as he struggles to let go and let come. Jesus reveals spiritual, Kingdom of heaven, truths, being transformed by the Holy Spirit from the inside out. Nicodemus is stuck on earth, the physical, being made right by works. Nicodemus is invited to let his cherished beliefs, traditions, rituals and way of life be reborn from above.

John 3:1-17 NLT "There was a man named Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader who was a Pharisee. After dark one evening, he came to speak with Jesus. "Rabbi," he said, "we all know that God has sent you to teach us. Your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with you." "Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, unless you are born from above, you cannot see the Kingdom of God." "What do you mean?" exclaimed Nicodemus. "How can an old man go back into his mother's womb and be born again?" Jesus replied, "I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. So, don't be surprised when I say, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can't tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can't explain how people are born of the Spirit." "How are these things possible?" Nicodemus asked. Jesus replied, "You are a respected Jewish teacher, and yet you don't understand these things? I assure you, we tell you what we know and have seen, and yet you won't believe our testimony. But if you don't believe me when I tell you about earthly things, how can you possibly believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ever gone to heaven and returned. But the Son of Man has come down from heaven. And as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in Jesus will have eternal life. "For this is how God loved the world: God gave God's one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in Jesus will not perish but have eternal life. God sent Jesus into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through Jesus."

Being born from above is transformation, seeing grace and learning to be gracious. God's spirit is like the wind, everywhere, powerful and beyond our control. God's grace is for everyone, powerful and is doing things beyond our grandest imagination.

Before his encounter with Jesus, Nicodemus was settled, a religious leader who knew and zealously kept the religious law. Nicodemus studied, discussed, interpreted, and applied the law. He lived his religion every minute of every day as it was defined by the law, all those rules and regulations.

Jesus invited Nicodemus to think new thoughts, seek fresh truth, and journey into a new way of living. Jesus invited Nicodemus to let go of old truths, old definitions, old traditions, old theological certainties, and follow God into an open-ended, hope-filled, joyful suffused, love expanding future.

God so loves the world. God is radically redefined—not in terms of power, or judgment, or punishment, or the law or about striving to be a good person, rather in terms of love. God so loves that God does not wait in holy splendor for people to worship, or ask forgiveness, or even strive to be more loving, rather God loves so much that God freely gives Jesus to transform us into glory. This is about a God who loves so much a son is given. It is personal for each of us. We are the ones loved. You are loved. We are invited to love one another as much as God loves us. Love transforms all.

God's wondrous love is for all. Anthony de Mello tells the story of some people who were on a raft off the coast of Brazil. They were perishing from thirst, since they knew that ocean water was undrinkable. What they did not know, however, was that the water they were floating on was fresh water. A nearby river was coming out into the sea with such force that it extended out for a couple of miles; so, they had fresh water surrounding them right where they were. But they had no idea. "In the same way," says de Mello, "we are surrounded with joy, with peace, with the love of the kingdom of God in our midst. Most people have no idea." Amen