

Sermon: 2020/03/08 (2nd Sunday in Lent) - Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5,13-17; & John 3:1-17_BTR

[Invite children to the front. Poster showing airport departure-lounge screen.]

Have you ever been to the airport?

What do you do?

When you get there?

Get out of the car.

Get your suitcases from the trunk.

Check your passport.

Go through security.

And find your "gate."

That's the place where you wait to board the plane, isn't it?

Long rows of uncomfortable chairs or benches, and you sit here staring at some large TV screens, right?

"Large TV screens" with lists of numbers and letters (from the Alphabet) telling you where your flight is departing from.

And you'll see lots of people standing before these "large TV screens" motionless, like statues. And then, *suddenly(!)*, they'll start running - or at least waling very quickly.

And soon as they see the right information come up, *whoosh(!)*, off they go, down the terminal.

There's no hesitation or debate.

Up comes the flashing sign saying "Go to Gate", "Boarding Now," or "Last Call," and *away* the crowds surge, in a hurry, to do *exactly* as the TV screen said to do.

And this was how Abraham was when God spoke to him.

God said, 'Go': [Gen. 12:1].

And Abraham - Abram - 'went': [12:4].

That's it!

No argument; no fuss; no debate.

And this is why Paul said that God 'reckoned to him...righteousness.' [Rom. 4:3]

Because Abram responded.

That's it.

He responded to God.

Took Him seriously.

Put Him first.

And we're challenged to do the same.

This is what it means to "have faith" - a *saving* faith.

To let God lead in our lives too; putting His wishes and plan first.

Let's pray:
Father God, ..., in Jesus' name, amen.

[Dismiss children.]

Nicodemus was a smart man.
He was a Sadducee!
Probably spoke multiple languages.
Probably had the Pentateuch - that's the first *five* books of the Bible - memorised.
Probably was familiar with some Latin and Greek philosophy.
He was the elite, you see.
The elite.
Educated.
Well-bred.
Moneyed too.
His was almost *certainly* an ancient family, you see - since he was a member of the Sanhedrin.
The ruling council.
That's how you qualified.
You had to come from a Jewish family with roots right back until before "The (Babylonian) Exile."
Traceable "roots" to one of the old Hebrew tribes, that Moses led out of slavery.
And *if* your family; your ancestors had survived *all* that time, and survived *all* that turmoil to bring you - Nicodemus - into the (Classical) world, then they had almost also *certainly* acquired a lot of money along the way.
Money for bribes.
Money for bodyguards.
And so on.
All these things Nicodemus had.
He was like a Kennedy or a Bush.
A Rothschild or a Rockefeller.
He was *genuinely* from an aristocratic dynasty.
The world was at his fingertips! - well, dusty Palestine at least was at his fingertips - let's not exaggerate.

And yet despite *all* that privilege and status and wealth, he knew something was missing.
There was a great, big *gaping* hole in his life and in his religion and in his worldview.
Something just didn't "add up."
The things he had been taught.
The things he was supposed to believe in:
the Jewish "jigsaw puzzle" was incomplete:

After all, consider it from his perspective, as one thoroughly steeped in his ancestral stories: a people "plucked" from mediocrity and obscurity, delivered from ignominious deaths in Egypt - free gifts of astonishing, undeserved heavenly grace, but given a Law on Sinai that they couldn't fulfill. That seemed to taunt them.

And then along came Jesus.

A young upstart; a maverick; a rabbi from the backwoods of Galilee, and Nicodemus knew right away that that thing he couldn't quite grasp; that that thing that was missing in his relationship with God; that that thing that his traditional Judaism couldn't offer or explain - this Jesus character had it.

And it was simple:

You yourself are insufficient (- and isn't that the truth?!);

"Be born again", Christ said.

You must be "born again."

Heaven - your salvation - depends on it.

But I think we Episcopalians - Anglicans and Catholics too... I think we're afraid of that phrase.

I know *I* was for a very long time.

It intimidated me.

I was suspicious of it.

Because being "born again" is a Pentecostal thing, right?

Where you shake and writhe on the floor, and shout incomprehensible things in the middle of worship, isn't it?

That's those guys down the road, yes?

Who wave the flags and "fall over in the Spirit."

That's not us.

They've no decorum, no dignity.

Our services are orderly and predictable.

I don't want to be born again!

I'm an introvert; I'm too shy.

I'm a "square."

Too old.

Too lame.

Too bored.

Too scared.

But is any of this true?

No.

(Or many of us are in *real* trouble.)

Although we may associate being "born again" with uninhibited, loud and unusual

behavior;

although we may associate being "born again" with the style and the taste of other Christian denominations - with small, independent chapels on quiet country roads, or with those *huge*, warehouse type of congregations, where the preacher wears snakeskin cowboy boots and/or skinny-jeans, *these* are notions we must *banish* from our minds.

They are wrong!

Unhelpful; misleading.

To be "born again" *might* manifest itself in those ways, yes - *and why not?! (It sounds like fun.)*, but, *fundamentally*, it refers is the work of sanctification - becoming holy - performed in our hearts and minds by the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, "poured" out into us at our baptisms; whether that happened to you as a baby or as an adult.

But what happens next is up to you.

Is He gathering dust in your soul?

Or are you putting Him through His paces; actively testing and growing and learning from Him?

Like a seed, then, He is planted as a gift from the Savior to those who confess, and feed on Him at the Eucharist.

And you can decide if that "seed" grows into a Californian sequoia-red-wood or if it proves to be merely a mustard seed.

An oak or a dandelion.

And like any plant it needs cultivation; nurture; nourishment.

And we do that when we pray.

When we fast.

When we perform acts of love and charity.

And Lent is, therefore, the perfect season to do all those things with renewed purpose and commitment.