

Second Sunday in Lent

Sermon February 17, 2008

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St. James' Episcopal Church, Potomac, MD

Genesis 12:1 – 4a
Romans 4:1-5, 13, 17
John 3:1 -17

The more I pondered the lectionary texts for today, the more I could not get away from the few simple verses we heard from Genesis – the call of Abraham.

Since the Genesis text was just a few verses, and the New Testament lesson was that famous passage from John about being born again, I asked myself if it was appropriate to base today's sermon on Abraham's call. As I thought about it I realized that God does not always choose the appropriate persons or methods to get his message across. Would any of us have thought that being born to Mary, a young, unwed mother was an appropriate way for the Son of God to enter the human experience, for example? No, God does not always make what we might think is the appropriate choice. Sometimes it is by choosing the least obvious, even the preposterous, that God calls our attention to his work in the world.

And so, being obedient to the call of the Spirit this morning, I am inviting you to come along with me to dig a bit deeper into this little bit of Old Testament scripture, to find the message for each one of us today. And maybe, before we finish we will find ourselves involved in the Gospel story as well!

What resonates for me from this Genesis reading as we walk the pathway of Lent, is not just what Abram (later renamed Abraham) is giving up, nor even what he is promised, but how much faith is involved in Abraham's answering of God's call.

You might think that Abraham, was someone special in God's eyes. But we are given no indication from the scripture of anything special about him when God first called him. Before the piece of the book of Genesis that we heard this morning he is just mentioned as a son of Terah, the idol maker. We are told that Abraham has a

wife Sarai (later renamed Sarah) who is barren, and that the whole extended family planned to move to Canaan, but got sidetracked and stayed in Haran, still a good way from Canaan.

But if Abraham was not anyone special, he appears to have been someone in whom God saw great possibilities. I think of it like the sculptor who looks at the marble block and sees “the Thinker” or “the Pieta.” To us it’s just a block of marble, but to the sculptor it has such possibility! God is like a sculptor. God sees in each of us the great possibility of what we can become if we listen to him, obey his call, and follow him.

God asks Abraham to leave his country and his kindred and his father’s house and to go “to a land that I will show you.” That’s not very much to go on is it? I think I would have wanted more than that. I would have at least wanted to know a bit about the demographics, the cost of living, the likelihood of jobs for my family. At the very least I would have liked a plan B in case the whole thing didn’t work out. But that’s not the way God works, is it? Abraham did not have the details, and he was not given the assurance of a plan B. What he was given was a great and wonderful promise: that he would be the source of a great nation, that he would be blessed, and that he would be famous! OK so I’d sign on to that ... Oh wait just a minute though. Sarah his wife was barren. In fact they were both a bit long in the tooth to have children. This promise that God gave Abraham required much faith to see it through. Perhaps this faith was what God saw in the block of marble that was Abraham.

Then in the next verse, in the sparest of words we hear: “So Abram went as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him.” It sounds so easy doesn’t it? Actually, it wasn’t just Abram and Lot, two men with their carry-on luggage. It was Abram, and Sarah, and their servants, and tents, and household goods, and flocks, and Lot and his wife, and their servants, and tents, and household goods, and flocks, and they must have needed several removal trucks to help with the moving. And I wonder what those staying behind had to say?

I imagine it was something like this: “Are you crazy? What are you chasing after, some dream of the good life? Why would you leave all that you have here in Haran - a nice house, a steady job, good health insurance, and

a strong pension plan?” And that was only his mother. What about his wife Sarah? I’ll bet she wasn’t too happy when Abraham revealed to her that he didn’t actually know where he was going beyond the first night!

There is so much behind these texts that we are not privy to. The very spare quality of the text illuminates something that the Holy Spirit means us to hear: “So Abram went, as the Lord had told him,” it says.

Abraham’s motivation is not important, and we know that he was a most flawed man. (That block of marble had some bad pieces in it that the sculptor had to work around.) The point is simple: Abram was obedient to the call of God, even when he didn’t know the details of the journey; even when he didn’t know the final destination, even when it was hard to see how God’s promise could possibly come to pass. He walked the journey, believing that God would keep his promise. This is the point for us too. We are all asked to walk with God on a journey; the journey of our lives. God doesn’t show us all the details. God often doesn’t even show us more than a step at a time along the way. But if we are obedient and set out as the Lord tells us, if we have faith in God’s promises, we too will have great rewards at the end of our journey.

We are going to leave Abraham where he is now – just at the beginning of the journey that would have many missteps along the way. But God was faithful and God was always looking at the potential in Abraham, just as he does in each of us.

Let’s turn to the Gospel of John because there is a connection after all! Nicodemus is called too and walks with God in a different way.

Nicodemus, though he doesn’t get what Jesus is saying about being spiritually reborn at all, is very attracted to the deeds and the person of Jesus. He sees something Godlike in Jesus. Nicodemus, a Pharisee, has been quietly observing Jesus’ ministry and has risked coming to see him, to find out more. He isn’t quite brave enough to come during the day when he might have been seen by witnesses, but something is driving him to find out who Jesus really is. Nicodemus seems to be rather a literal thinker and doesn’t understand the answers that Jesus gives. But although Nicodemus doesn’t seem to have been able to grasp the implications, he doesn’t just go away and forget about Jesus.

Nicodemus turns up twice more in the Gospel of John. So apparently, although he doesn't immediately get all the implications (and who does?), he continues to follow Jesus around, perhaps lingering in the background, listening, and thinking, and mulling things over. In John 7 this same Nicodemus defends Jesus before the religious court, and finally in John 19 it is Nicodemus who provides the myrrh and aloes and helps with the burial of Jesus. He has been on the journey with Jesus and the disciples all along. He has heard the call to be "born from above" at some level. He has seen "the Son of Man lifted up," on the cross, and perhaps we might permit ourselves to think that Nicodemus is not condemned, but saved and therefore is going to receive the great and wonderful promise of God for all who journey with him, the promise of eternal life.

In today's readings we have heard about two people who, in their own way, heard God's call and walked with God to an unknown destination. Abraham walked the long journey to Canaan with God. Nicodemus walked the long journey to Golgotha with Jesus.

Lent is a season where it seems that we are constantly reminded that all of life is a journey. As we follow the footsteps of Jesus, we are asked to hear what God is saying to us through the Holy Spirit.

About 8 years ago my husband and I were sitting in church in Florida, perhaps on this very Sunday, the second Sunday in Lent, and the sermon included a part about being prepared to make changes in our lives. It affected me in a profound way. After the service when my husband and I talked about the sermon, I was afraid to say how I had been affected by it. But when my husband said "It sounds like we need to prepare ourselves for some changes," I knew God had spoken to both of us that day.

About a year later I heard God's call to ordination. This meant having to leave my job, my home, my husband, and come to unknown Virginia! My husband coped with a whole different set of changes in his life as we learned how to live apart.

I know that I felt I had to preach this sermon on the call of Abraham, and Nicodemus because I am now at a point in my journey when more changes are about to happen in my life. I'm listening to hear God's call into my

ordained ministry. But I'd be willing to bet that God has also spoken to every one of you today, as well.

God's words do not return to him empty, as it says in Isaiah 55:11.

As we walk through Lent together, I encourage you to keep listening for God's call. Maybe it will be overt like God's call to Abraham, or maybe by hanging around where Jesus is, by following and watching and mulling things over like Nicodemus you will discover your calling. Maybe you will hear what God wants for you along the next part of your journey as you practice your Lenten discipline! Amen