

March 1, 2026
The Second Sunday in Lent, Year A
Trinity, St. Louis
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Genesis 12:1-4a

Psalm 121

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

John 3:1-17

Before I begin the sermon, let us pray for peace.

O God, who dwells beyond all our names for you,
we remember this day those who find themselves thrust into war;
we pray for light in the darkness, and hope amid despair.

We pray for peace in ourselves;
help us to breathe in peace, help us to breathe out love;
help us know and accept each other as your beloved.

Let there be peace in our communities;
help us to create a peace born of justice and equity;
help us to honor and serve the common good.

Let there be peace in our nation;
sustain our hope; grant us wisdom;
empower us with courage.

Let there be peace in our world.
Help us to love the earth as our mother;
help us to see other nations as our neighbors;
help us to wage peace.

Mercifully hear the prayers of your people
who are tempted to give in to fear and despair,
and grant us, O God, your peace in our time.

All this we pray in the Name of the Holy and Undivided Trinity
who blows where it chooses. Amen.¹

So far this Lent, we've spent time remembering our origins, as dust; and our identity, as beloved creatures of God. Today is travel day. In the beginning of the 12th chapter of Genesis that we just heard, God speaks directly to Abram: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you."

¹ Adapted from a Litany for Peace by the Reverend Kay Sylvester Rector, St. Paul's, Tustin, Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles.

Abram must have thought, “now which land would that be?” Just imagine a game show, where the host says, *you have won an all-expenses-paid trip to the land behind Curtain #2* but never opens the curtain!

It’s common for people to say, “it’s not about the destination, it’s about the journey.” I want to push that a little further, to say that it’s about the journeying...the sometimes thrilling, occasionally terrifying, often mind-numbingly mundane process of placing one foot in front of the other. The meaning is in the moving itself.

This wasn’t the first time Abram’s family had caught the travel bug. Abram’s father Terah had started to move the family to Canaan. They traveled north from Ur of the Chaldees (think southern Iraq), most likely following the Euphrates River to avoid the Syrian Desert. They turned left and stopped temporarily in Haran (think Southern Turkey). And temporary became permanent, until Terah died at the tender age of 205. Then, God got busy!

God doesn’t tell Abram, “load up the station wagon and move on down to Canaan.” God simply says “go.” But...how do you go when you don’t know where you’re going?

Were you taught when you were young to “make a plan and stick to it”? It’s important to have dreams and goals. They keep us looking into the future. And the “stick to it” bit is partly about perseverance. But I wonder if it’s more about control, by which I mean our illusion of control.

Take a moment and look in your own rearview mirror. How many of you have ever said, with great earnestness, “Here’s my plan. I’m going to end up right over...there...” How did that work out?

God’s invitation into the unknown, and Abram’s faithful response, is the foundation of the covenant in *which all the families of the earth shall be blessed*. We have always stood in covenant relationship with God. It’s how God works.

Before Abram’s time, God had made a covenant with Noah (the rainbow). Later on, God makes covenants with Moses and David, which are renewed through the prophets. Finally, as we remember at every Eucharist, Jesus says, “this is my blood of the New Covenant.”

In God’s covenant with Noah, God promised one thing, no more world-wide floods. The promises to Abram are three:

1. The promise of land – a land, somewhere, to be named later. This remains complicated.

2. The promise of descendants. At the start of our story, Abram was 75, and had no children with his wife, Sarai. So, again, to be named later, with its own complications.

3. The promise of blessing and redemption of all nations through him.

So, let's get to the going. I have always been fascinated by the idea of a road trip with no destination. Do you turn right or left? Is it close or far? Are there any Howard Johnson's or Stuckey's on the way? Maybe this is origin of men never wanting to ask for directions.

God constantly asked Abram to journey into the trackless wastes toward an unknown destination and an unseen future. Nevertheless, Abram goes. He just goes. And he keeps on going. The Letter of James (2:23) says that "Abram believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness, and he was called the friend of God." It was about the journeying.

+ + +

Let's look at another invitation to venture into the unknown. One night, Jesus is approached by Nicodemus — a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin (the supreme religious council of Judaism), likely one of the most learned men of his day. Perhaps Nicodemus comes under the cover of darkness because he worried that he would lose credibility with his colleagues if they knew he was consulting this disreputable itinerant teacher, this prophetic loose cannon.

But we can also see the darkness and hesitancy in this story as invitation. In *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, Barbara Brown Taylor observes that "new life starts in the dark. Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark."

Nicodemus begins with what he knows. "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."

But I suspect that Jesus sensed that what Nicodemus really wanted to know was how to get into the Kingdom of God. So, dispensing with small talk, he says, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above" (3:3).

Nicodemus, an expert in all things religious, is befuddled. "How can these things be? Born from above isn't in any book or on any map that I know." Then, with a series of images, Jesus extends to Nicodemus an invitation into the not-yet-known.

In Aramaic, the language that Jesus probably spoke, and in the Greek in which St. John wrote, there is a single word for Wind, or Breath, or Spirit; that word is *pneuma*.

Jesus said, “The wind [*pneuma*] 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 [*pneuma*]” (3:8).²

On his own, Nicodemus would not be able to think his way into the revelation that he seeks. “See,” says Jesus, “*pneuma* is already one of the things your overeducated mind doesn’t really understand, and that’s ok, isn’t it? Now, relax into that, and recognize that there are many things beyond intellect. Trust me, and take the next step.” The analogies of darkness, birth, and wind are the foundation for the ultimate invitation to which Nicodemus must respond – an invitation into trust.

Do you remember the 1989 film *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*?³ Searching for medicine for his father, Indy stands at the edge of a giant chasm. There’s no way he could ever come close to jumping across. Eventually, he realizes that it requires a leap of faith. He takes a step off the edge, and boom! A bridge that had been invisible appears beneath his feet.

This is an experience that is not limited to the Bible, or to adventure films. Millions of people who have found themselves at the bottom of a pit, or with their backs against a wall, be it from drugs and alcohol, or abusive relationships, or chronic illness, or fear of the other, or systemic racism, or countless other unjust ills of the world, have responded to God’s invitation to take just one tiny step in a different direction, into the light. And then another; and another – one day coming to realize that God was doing for them what they could not do for themselves.⁴

Jesus calls for trust from a person, be it Nicodemus, or me, or you, who approaches by night, seeking the safety of the shadows. He calls for trust from a person who wants to apply the logic of the flesh to life born of the Spirit. He calls for trust, because trusting him is ultimately at the center of the life that Jesus came to proclaim. In the dark, we are invited to trust enough to step into what we cannot yet see, because that is where new life begins.⁵

After all, what Jesus was offering Nicodemus (foreshadowed in Abram, and true for us) was not a tune-up, or a few minor tweaks to an already near-perfect life. Jesus was inviting Nicodemus into a brand-new life.

For Nicodemus, and for us, believing in, trusting in, Jesus meant starting anew, letting go of thinking we had life in God all figured out. It meant being “born again,”

² See Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 2005, pp. 14-15.

³ Scene 14.

⁴ *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p 84.

⁵ Thanks for the thoughts of Pastor Serena Rice, <https://www.christiancentury.org/lectionary/march-1-lent-2a-john-3-1-17>

becoming vulnerable, hungry, and ready to receive reality in brand-new ways. It meant being OK with getting lost in the wilderness occasionally. It meant journeying out of the night and risking the day, step by step.

As we continue journeying through the wilderness toward Easter, I want to share a poem by a retired United Methodist minister named Steve Garnaas-Holmes. I invite you to close your eyes and experience the mosaic of images that the poet paints. Let them fill your mind and heart. Remember Abram's faith. Keep in mind Nicodemus' perplexed "how can this be?" Recall the twists and turns of your own journeying.

NEW BIRTH

God called Abram to leave the familiar and go,
go on a road he would make by going,
to a place he would know by finding.

Jesus led Nicodemus to the threshold of a birth,
a newness he could only know
by going through it.

Only what's behind us, not ahead,
keeps us from going on, from entering
the impossible womb of starting new.

The stones of disappointment in your pockets,
the grave marker of the old life,
they can't come with you.

The path is not a test. It's our freedom.
Many a prisoner has looked into the tunnel,
the Beloved waiting in the light, and said no.

Where is the Spirit calling you, the wind blowing?
Where is the thin place between your habits
and a new birth?

These pangs, this heavy breathing:
the beloved is trying to birth you.
Let it happen.⁶

May your Lenten journeying be fruitful. Amen.

⁶ <https://unfoldinglight.net/2014/03/13/2331/>