

## “Faith Anew”

### Sermon – March 8, 2020 Stone Presbyterian Church

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Promises. God likes to make promises. In Genesis 1 after the creation of humankind God promises them dominion over the earth and its creatures.

Then last week we heard the story of Adam and Eve and their disobedience to God by eating the fruit from the forbidden tree, so God sends them out from the Garden of Eden and promises them life will be hard for them now.

Then after God wipes out humankind in the Flood, except for Noah the people on the ark with him, God promises never to do that again and puts a bow in the sky as a sign of his promise.

Today we hear yet another promise at a critical point in the book of Genesis.

You can view the first 11 chapters of Genesis as the primeval history, discussing nature of God and humankind’s relationship with God.

Two dominant themes emerge in these stories: 1) the tendency for human beings to rebel against their Creator and the consequences of judgment that follow; and 2) the continued blessing of God that seeks to address humanity in spite of divine judgment.

Chapter 11 ends with Terah and his descendants, including a son, Abram *[show slide]*. You can see the biblical record showing a simplified genealogy from Adam and Eve to Abram.

Today’s Old Testament lesson today starts immediately and abruptly after that with the beginning of chapter 12, saying, “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.”

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No introduction, no context, no dialogue—just uproot yourself and go.

Now, God does follow the command with promises,  
“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.

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.”

These kind of promises we call “covenants.” This particular covenant was a  
binding unilateral treaty between a sovereign to a vassal. These were  
common in the ancient Middle East amongst the empires and rulers  
and their subordinates.

These promises of God here is the key to the rest of the book of Genesis and  
indeed to the Old Testament as a whole. This sovereign covenant  
links the creation stories in the first 11 chapters with the ancestral  
narratives that follow, and to point forward to the later history of  
Israel, “a great nation.”

These verses are the pivot point in the Old Testament story. They call  
Abram to leave his country, his clan, and his home for a new home in  
a new land.

After stating the promises, the beginning of the next verse simply says, “So  
Abram went, as the Lord told him.” And ends with “Abram was 75  
years old when he departed.”

Rich and comfortable at the age of 75, when you normally are looking to  
take it easy, Abram gets up and goes without question based on a  
promise that God will make of him a great nation—even though his  
wife, Sarai, is barren. Who does that?

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Well, he does and now becomes a migrant. Even when he eventually settles in Canaan, he must negotiate for a burial plot when his wife dies, describing himself to the Canaanites as “a stranger and an alien residing among you.” The Father of Nations first must leave the comfort of his home and familiar surroundings and start anew—based purely on his faith in promises, the covenant, of God.

And this is what Paul is referring to in today’s epistle lesson of who is in Abraham’s family.

Paul and other believers needed to establish how Gentiles could be part of God's covenant people without attention to the Torah.

If God could simply cast aside all the covenant promises made to Abraham, David, and through the prophets, in favor of a new people, it is God who is unreliable, indeed, unfaithful.

And if God has been unfaithful to God's promise to the children of Abraham “according to the flesh,” why should anyone trust that God will be faithful in the future?

Paul says, essentially, Abraham’s relationship was not transactional; he didn’t do something and in exchange God gave him his due. Paul says in verse 3, “For what does the scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.’” Abraham’s faith made him righteous and God’s promises were a gift, not a reward. Paul says in verse 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.”

In fact there was no Law, no Torah, with Abraham; that would come much later with Moses. Thus, as verse 16 says, “For this reason it depends

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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.”

So not only does the breadth of God’s renewal encompass the whole world, it also encompasses all peoples. The promise to Abraham that he would be a father of many nations is now transformed: those aren’t nations that come out of Abraham’s body; they are nations that flock to Abraham’s God, that share that faith.

This is the kind of faith that Jesus is talking about with Nicodemus in today’s gospel lesson. That one must be born *anóthen* (AN-oh-then), a Greek word that can mean “from above,” “again,” or “anew.” Jesus is purposely ambiguous in part because all are true.

We are not people of faith because our parents and forebearers were. We are people of faith only when we let the spirit from above and make us anew and seeing that God loves the whole world, the good and the bad, and so should we.

But that doesn’t mean faith necessarily comes any easier than it did for Nicodemus.

As Associate Professor of Preaching at Luther Seminary, Karoline Lewis writes:

“We tend to talk about “our faith” or “having faith,” assuming that it is a done deal, that believing is as simple as acquiring faith. But the Gospel of John never refers to faith as a noun. Faith is not a possession, not something that one gets, not something that one has-- it is something that one does. Believing, for the characters in the Fourth Gospel, is a verb. And as a verb, believing is subject to all of

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the ambiguity, the uncertainty, and the indecisiveness of being human. We need to ask more often than we are willing to admit, "how can these things be?" We need to take seriously what faith looks like when it is active, living, permeable, and dynamic. We need to consider earnestly that having an incarnated God may require an incarnational faith -- that believing is just as complicated as it is to be human.”

Abraham and Sarah left behind an old life and their journey toward a future not yet seen born on a faith in what had come from above. Jewish and Gentile believers in Paul’s time, like Nicodemus, had to reject old patterns and old ways of being and let their faith be born anew.

The season of Lent is a season that helps us to let go of old commitments and burdens and sets us free to journey into new territories, new promises, new hopes, and new lives and to accept God's free gift of grace and life everlasting.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.  
Amen.