

## **“It’s A Lot to Ask”**

2<sup>nd</sup> Lent – Feb. 12, 2017

### **Genesis 12:1-4a**

12:1 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. 2:2 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. 12:3 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." 12:4a So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him.

### **Romans 4:1-5, 13-17**

4:1 What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? 4:2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 4:3 For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." 4:4 Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. 4:5 But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. 4:13 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. 4:14 If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. 4:15 For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. 4:16 For this reason it depends 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 (for he is the father of all of us, 4:17 as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations") -- in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

### **John 3:1-17**

3:1 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 3:2 He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "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." 3:3 Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." 3:4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" 3:5 Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 3:6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 3:7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 3:8 The wind 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." 3:9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" 3:10 Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? 3:11 "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. 3:12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 3:13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 3:14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 3:15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 3:17 "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Today we get a couple of really good, really timeless stories about some folks who are kind of – well, no, they are heroes of the faith. And they become heroes of the faith in the later years of their lives. Today, on the second Sunday of Lent we get another of those ‘it’s a lot to ask’ scenarios that are intended to help us put what is asked of us by God in a kind of perspective of these people – Abraham and Sarah, and a rather unlikely Pharisee by the name of Nicodemus. People who are just minding their own business when confronted with what God wants from them.

As Lent begins, Ash Wednesday and the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent set the stage for us. This Lenten experience is about moving. It’s about going from we are as humanity and as individuals to the place we are supposed to be. We see the world with all of its problems and temptations and challenges set before us. Saving this world with all of its imperfections and problems, all of its sadness and sin, has always been, and still is God’s goal.

Back in the beginning of the story, at the end of the stories of the temptation and fall from grace, when we kind of get the feeling that God is having to reevaluate the human being, when the garden doesn’t work out so well and God finally scraps the whole project with Noah and the flood, God finds humanity quickly back to our old tricks. It’s a lot to ask of people to behave themselves and enjoy that life God provides.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis God goes in another direction and decides that the ultimate fate of God's human creation will be in the relationship between God and a people. A chosen people. So God calls upon the unlikely duo of octogenarians Abraham and Sarah to help start the unraveling, the rebirthing, the recreation of our relationship with God. Not exactly the dynamic duo. Hardly the two who would have been scripted by Hollywood. It's a lot to ask of these two. Just beginning with the fact that they are supposed to father and mother a nation and they're in the twilight years quite childless. But they were tough, and willing and even though it would disorient and disturb everything in their lives they were prepared to go along and in truth started on the very first journey of faith, a very Lenten journey of faith that has an expressed objective, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 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. ..and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Packing up, picking up and moving, rolling up those carpets and striking the tents wasn't a problem for these nomads with wandering Arameans as their ancestors. They knew movement. They knew where they would be in the cold of February and in the heat of July, they knew where to find the green pastures and the still waters. But this, this was "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you."

That's likely to make you lie awake and wonder if it's really God calling you or some hoaxter who just wants your spot in the RV resort. //

This story always shows up in Lent, because again, Lent is for us that time when we practice our faith for those other times in our lives when we need to know who God is, and where God is. For those times in our lives when we face a relational 'it's a lot to ask' moment. When we are confronted by Jesus, by our faith, by our calling as Christians to be more than we think we can be. Don't tell them, but that's why for over 30 years I and my willing accomplices have been doing fundraisers and packing up kids and heading off to the promised land called Montreat. For them it's mostly about fun and adventure and all those other kids when for God it's about getting them a place where they find the atmosphere charged with possibility where God can speak through a small group or 1200 kids singing or around a lake with candles glowing on a mystical night after they've been there a few times and they realize – sorry seniors, spoiler alert – they realize they are on the edge of decision time, discernment time, crunch time, it's a lot to ask time – when the voice of God says “what are you going to do and where are you going to go – not just for you – but for me?”

God has, by the way, been doing that since, well since Abraham and Sarah. Jesus was quite good at it. He drags a net down a beach and fishermen follow. He creates a wonder and people fall in line behind him. In

the Lent of people's lives as he's on the way to the cross is when Jesus calls us. And we get today, the second old guy who feels compelled to find out something about this Jesus. Who doesn't intend to accept the party line about the rabbi of Galilee. And the meeting is set. Out by the campfire in the night a stodgy old Pharisee sneaks out to him in secret, and discovers that in him, things aren't what you ever thought they were. Nicodemus, whom we see in the flickering lamplight, his face an arresting mixture of confusion and interest is confronted by something that's a lot to ask.

Nicodemus, and we along with him are asked to suspend belief when Jesus says "You must be born from above." What he means is "you have come to a place and a moment in time when you have to go back to the beginning and let your faith and understanding of God be born all over again. Nothing is as you ever thought it was. Nothing."

Nicodemus, his head spinning says, so how can these things be? Jesus says to him, "because God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. In fact, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, even though it might deserve it, but in order that the world might be saved through him." The whole world. The world God sent Abraham in search of a place and a promise and a people to bless -- "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Like these icons of the faith, Abraham, Sarah and Nicodemus, we know that when we God wants something more of us, we know that ‘it’s a lot to ask.’ God wants us to leave behind all that binds us to something else so that we may freely follow Jesus along this way to Jerusalem. God wants us to be born from above which changes our perspective from me and what I would think, feel and do ... to follow the one who is the way, the truth and the life. God wants us to realize that Christ is the lord and savior of the world, not simply our part of the world, or the part of the world we like, or the people we like, or the faiths we like. The world.

God calls us and yes, it’s a lot to ask, but God goes with us. Jesus walks beside us. The holy spirit surprises us with a fresh wind of possibility and gives us a community of faith – the church. A fellowship and a family with whom we go. It’s a lot to ask, but the journey is our life.