

Second Sunday in Lent, March 8, 2020
“Stepping Out” (Genesis 12:1-4 and John 3:1-17)

When Susan and I got married we decided to live in Claremont. We moved a mobile home onto a piece of land my parents had given us and lived in it for a few years until we built our house on the same property. Living on family land, our neighbors, of course, were all family members. But that was kind of the Sigmon pattern: get married, build a house in the same area you’d always lived, and raise your family there.

We were comfortable there – and settled. Having placed our roots firmly in Claremont, we believed we would be there until we died. At least, that was the plan. But at the age of 32, God called me to step out of what was comfortable and familiar and go in a different direction.

I can certainly relate to Abram in today’s first reading. Abram was 75 years old and probably much more set in his ways than I was. He had lived in Haran most of his life. His family, friends, and everything he knew were there. I bet he never imagined moving from the area. And without any children, he and his wife needed to be near extended family in their final years. But God had other plans for them.

Some of you have lived in this area your entire lives. Your children are here, and perhaps even your grandchildren. Your parents are buried here. The school you attended is here. Your doctor, your barber, your church are here. Everything you know is right here. Imagine God coming and asking you to leave it all behind and move somewhere else. That was the case with Abram and Sarai. They were already in their golden years, an age in which one generally does not consider forging a new path in life.

But that is exactly what God asked Abram and Sarai to do. God said, *Abram, leave your home, your friends and family, and go to a place that I will show you.*” God didn’t say, *Go to Canaan or the promised land.* God didn’t tell them where they were going, just that he would show them the place.

This must have taken them both completely by surprise. But Abram had always been faithful to God, and God had said, *I will make you a great nation. I will bless you...and make your name great so that you will be a blessing.* That was an attractive promise to an old man with no children. So Abram went as God had told him. He stepped out – out of his comfortable, peaceful life in Haran, out of the rocking chair on the front porch of the old home place – and onto the road ahead of him to spend his retirement following God. No longer would he be Abram of Haran. He would be Abram of some place that God would show him. Now that’s trust. God said “go” and Abram didn’t even ask in what direction. He simply stepped out in faith.

God is always asking people to step out in faith. Just look through the Scriptures. Noah was asked to build an ark because God said there would be a flood. Moses was asked to go to Pharaoh and demand the release of the slaves. And the OT prophets were asked to prophesy all kinds of unbelievable things just because God said they would do so.

That's what faith is. It is stepping out of our present patterns only because God is calling us to. Faith means trusting God's promises and God's word. It means taking a chance on a promise we can't fully see or understand. For some, faith may bring drastic changes even though they are 75 and set in their ways.

The Bible tells us that we are saved by grace through faith. Abram, you see, could not make himself a great nation, but God could – and did – because Abram had faith. He trusted God's promises and God blessed him. Likewise, we can't find for ourselves a life filled with peace, contentment, security and joy. But when we trust the Almighty to guide our lives, we will discover that God blesses us with the very things we seek. When we place our faith in Jesus, we will experience the abundant life he promises.

This is what Jesus was talking about to Nicodemus. Nicodemus, like Abram, had a comfortable life. As a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, he had position, power, and wealth. But those things couldn't give him what he really needed. Nor could his in-depth knowledge of the law. What he really needed was a restored relationship with his Heavenly Father. He needed the kingdom of heaven. And this new teacher, Jesus, who had often spoke of this kingdom, might be able to help him discover what was missing.

John tells us that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. Perhaps he knew that the crowds surrounding Jesus would be gone when darkness fell, providing the two with uninterrupted conversation. Or perhaps he used the cover of darkness so as not to be seen by his colleagues. Or maybe this nighttime setting was crafted by the gospel writer, John, to be symbolic. Throughout his gospel, darkness is a symbol of unbelief. Is John setting the stage here to later show us how Nicodemus has changed? To show us how he has been transformed when he comes in the light of day to ask for Jesus' corpse?

We don't really know. The important thing is that Nicodemus came. And he approached Jesus with his presumptions: *We know that you are a teacher who has come from God, because you couldn't do all these signs apart from the presence of God.* But when Jesus responded to his statement with something that seemed completely unrelated, Nicodemus found out how little he really did know. *No one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.* When Nicodemus failed to understand, Jesus continued, *You have to be born of water and the Spirit.*

Jesus was referring to the water of the womb, but he was also alluding to the water of Baptism and the Spirit of God that comes only from above. In other words, you have to start all over again, make a new beginning. But this beginning is not your own doing. It is not a work of the flesh. It must be God's work in you.

You see, Nicodemus had lived his whole life trying to earn his salvation. Like all of the Pharisees, he thought that by keeping the law he could merit God's favor. But Jesus said, *no, you must step out in a new direction and trust what God is doing. Whoever places their faith in what God is doing has eternal life.* Jesus was telling Nicodemus – and us – that eternal life is a gift from God above. It doesn't come from what we know up here (*head*) or by the good things we do. It's about what we experience here (*heart*)

Through the Holy Spirit – or our rebirth – God gives us a clean slate. God’s desire – all the way back to the OT – has always been to save us. That’s why he sent Jesus to die on the cross for our sins. To receive this gift, we must simply step out in faith, by placing our trust in Christ and his promise of salvation. And as we grow in Christ, God blesses us with peace, love and joy, the fruits of salvation: Faith, then, is stepping out in trust. It is trusting God’s word and promises enough to take a chance.

Abram took a chance on leaving home at the age of 75 to start a new life. He didn’t do it because he had a plan or an idea. He did it because God said, *Do this and I will bless you.*

Jesus told Nicodemus to take a chance on a new beginning; not a new beginning created by the flesh; not a new beginning based on his own intuition, intelligence, or good works; but one based on the grace and forgiveness of God given through the Holy Spirit.

God calls us to do the same. During this holy season of Lent, as we reflect on Christ’s sacrifice and the suffering he endured on our behalf, may we step out in faith. May we trust that God loves us and the world he created so much that he sent his only Son not to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

God blessed Abram and Sarai and made them a great nation. No matter what our situation in life today, God wants to bless us in some way. God wants us to have happiness, peace, and joy in our lives. And just like he did with Abram and Sarai, God will guide us. If we don’t know how to let God be our guide, we just need to ask and trust God enough to show us. And we, too, will discover the truth: God blesses those who place their trust in him.