

A New Life
Genesis 12:1–4; John 3:1–17; Romans 4:1–5, 13–17
Sunday, March 8, 2020 (Lent 2)

I want to start by asking you a question. When I say the words *born again*, what do you think of? What comes to your mind? What do you associate with that?

What about when I say *John 3:16*? What do you think of and associate with *that*?

So obviously I ask that because these two concepts are in our scripture reading from John today. And they are concepts that are very *familiar* to us. Even people who did not grow up in the church and are not Christians are somewhat familiar with these two ideas. We have a lot of associations, sometimes even *baggage*, that come along with them. They are very familiar. But sometimes something can become so familiar to us that we don't really *see* it anymore.

Back around Christmas, we had the sanctuary all decorated – the greenery was up, the poinsettias, the Advent candles, and the Christmas tree was over there. Well, the Sunday before Christmas, Pat Churchill was here. She had moved away over the summer and was back visiting family. And she came up to me before worship and said, “Where are the decorations on the tree?” I was like, “What do you mean?” And she said, “The Christmas tree doesn't have any ornaments on it. We bought all new ornaments last year, and they're not up.” I went and looked at it and, sure enough, there were lights but no ornaments on it. I had walked past that tree *dozens* of times over the four weeks that it was up, and I just *assumed* that it was decorated because it was *always* decorated, every year. It had become so *familiar* to me that I didn't really *see* it as it actually *was* anymore.

That same thing can happen to us with other aspects of our lives and with *faith* and with *scripture*. Theologians have a name for it. It's called *the Scandal of Familiarity*. Something can become so *familiar* to us that it actually ends up being *unfamiliar*, and we don't know it as well as we *think* we do. I think there is an extent to which that has happened to us when it comes to John 3:16 and the concept of being *born again*. We kind of walk past it in this scripture reading and assume we know what's going on, but do we actually *see* it for what it is; *see* what God is saying to us here *today*? So the lectionary – the calendar of assigned scripture readings for each week – has us looking at this today, but it has us looking at it paired with these other two readings from Genesis and Romans, which might help us *see* it and *understand* it in a new way.

We're going to start with the story of Abram in Genesis. This is the first time we encounter Abram in scripture, and it's before his name is changed to *Abraham*. He is seventy-five years old, so he has already lived a pretty full life. He is married and established. It's safe to assume that he has a pretty comfortable existence. I mean, how many of you who are around 75 are looking to leave everything behind and begin a whole new life? And yet that's exactly what happens with Abram.

God says, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. Leave behind everything that is comfortable and familiar, all your friends, all your family, this life that you have established for yourself, and go to this totally new, unknown, unfamiliar, place to start a whole new life." How many of us are jumping at *that* opportunity? And yet it is *through* this that God says Abram will be *blessed*, and that all the families of the earth will be blessed *through* him. So Abram goes.

Paul talks in Romans about how this was an act of *faith* on Abram's part. That word *faith* is another one of these ideas that we become so familiar with that it becomes *unfamiliar*; we *think* we know what it means, but we might actually *miss* it. We take it to mean *believing* in God; a kind of intellectual assent. That to "have faith" means that you "believe in God." But the Greek word Paul uses there is the word *pistis*, and *pistis* isn't just a mental or intellectual belief. It is a *living out* of your belief. It means something closer to *trust*.

It's one thing for me to say, "I *believe* in God." It's another thing entirely for me to say, "I *trust* God. I am willing to *live* in ways that demonstrate my trust. I'm willing to put my day-to-day life and needs in God's hands, trusting God to provide and make life possible." *That* is faith. Anyone can *believe* in God. But not everyone lives in ways that trust God to provide in concrete ways for their life. That's what Abram did. He *trusted God*, left behind the familiar, comfortable, safe place he was in, and took a step of faith into a new life.

Now, here's something cool. When John uses that word *pistis* in his gospel – that word Paul uses to talk about *faith*, *belief*, or *trust* – John never uses that word as a *noun*. It is *always* a *verb*. Faith is not a *possession*, something you *get* or *have*. It is something you *do*. And like Abram, Nicodemus is being called into this same kind of faith.

Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a Jewish religious leader. It has taken him a *lifetime* of hard work to get to the point that he is at. He is *established* and *respected*, and Pharisees lived pretty comfortable lives. But Jesus comes along and challenges that establishment, challenges the way that the Pharisees are practicing their faith. So from the get-go, Jesus and the Pharisees are at odds with each other. But Nicodemus has *seen* the things that Jesus has been doing – his

miracles and his teachings – and he knows that there is something *special* about Jesus; that Jesus is “from God.”

So Nicodemus goes to Jesus *at night*. He is a respected Pharisee. He doesn't want anyone to *see* him going to talk with this man who has been *challenging* the very establishment that he is a *part* of. He goes in secret because he was not willing to risk losing what he had. He says to Jesus, “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.” He's essentially saying, “I *believe* that you are from God because I have *seen* the things that you do.” And Jesus essentially says back to him, “But do you *trust*?”

Jesus says, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” That phrase “born from above” also get translated “born again.” That's where this whole concept of a “born again Christian” comes from. The word that is used there is the Greek word *anōthen*, and it has *multiple* meanings at the same time. It means, “again,” “anew,” and “from above.” So Nicodemus is confused, because he hears this as “born *again*,” and he says, “How can anyone be *born* after having grown old?” But Jesus, of course, isn't talking about the physical act of being born. He is talking about a *reorienting of your life*, from the things that are of the *flesh* to the things that are of the *Spirit*; from the things that are of *this world* to the things that are from *above*.

He is calling Nicodemus to reorient his life; to do what Abram did – to take a step of faith out of this familiar place where he is safe and comfortable and begin a new life, trusting God to provide what he needs to make that life possible. And it is within that context that Jesus says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him (who *trust*

him) may not perish but may have eternal life.” He is saying, “If you live in ways that trust God, *you will not perish*. You will live a life that goes on and on and on; it will *never end*. Take a step into this new life with God, and God will not let you fall.”

And the thing about Nicodemus is, he takes the step. We see Nicodemus two more times in John’s gospel. This first time, he comes to Jesus at night with questions and confusion and uncertainty. The next time we see him is in chapter 7. The Pharisees want Jesus to be arrested because people are saying that he’s the Messiah, and that’s blasphemy. The temple police don’t *want* to arrest him because, they say, “No one has ever spoken like this or done the things he has done!” The Pharisees say, “Has he deceived you, too?! We’re the ones who know the law! Have any of the Pharisees believed in him?” And then it flashes over to Nicodemus, like the question has been asked to *him*. And Nicodemus says, “The law doesn’t judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they’re doing, does it?” He kind of half-heartedly defends Jesus, but he stops short of saying, “Actually, *I* believe that he is from God.” So Nicodemus goes from having questions and doubts in that first encounter with Jesus, to kind-of-sort-of sticking up for him.

The third and final time that we see Nicodemus is in chapter 19, after Jesus has been crucified. It says, “After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews.” And they buried Jesus.

Nicodemus participates in the act that is reserved for a disciple. He prepares the body of Jesus for burial, and he does so in an *abundant* way, with a hundred pounds of spices. This would have been incredibly extravagant and expensive, the kind of burial that is normally reserved for a *king*. Nicodemus goes from questioning Jesus to half-heartedly defending him to very lovingly and *publicly* burying him. Jesus called him back in chapter 3 to reorient his life. And he took a step. Then he took another step. And another step. And by the end, he was a different person. Sometimes that process happens *quickly*, like with Abram. God says, “Go,” and he goes. Sometimes it takes more time.

Like Abram and Nicodemus, God calls *all* of us to reorient our lives from the things of this world to that which is from above; to take a step of faith out of the safe, comfortable, familiar places in which we live and begin a new life, trusting God to provide what we need to make that life possible.

What might that look like for you? What familiar thing might you need to leave behind to step into this new life? A job that’s holding you back and dictating your life? A mindset or belief that is no longer serving you well? A toxic relationship? A health situation? Fear or worry? Anger or a grudge? Guilt? An addiction? It’s funny what can become familiar and comfortable to us. Sometimes we get so comfortable in an addiction or a relationship that we know isn’t healthy for us, but we just can’t imagine life without it. Or we lose a loved one and we can’t let go of our grief because we can’t imagine what life would be like without it. If I let go of my grief, am I letting go of this *person*? We hold on to all kinds of things because we can’t envision what a different life would look like, or we *can* envision it and it *scars* us to death.

Whatever you are holding onto – or whatever is holding on to you – God is calling you to take a step in trust into a new life. Maybe it happens all at once or maybe it takes many steps over a long time. But like Abram and Nicodemus, that new place is where we will discover the blessing of God. And it may be terrifying, but we have the promise here that everyone who lives in ways that trust God *will not perish*. Because, like Paul says, this is the God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. God makes a new future – a new *life* – possible. All we have to do is take a step, following the leading of God’s Spirit, trusting that God will bring us to a good new place where the blessing of God awaits.