

Year A Lent 2
Genesis 12:1-4a
Psalm 121
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17
John 3:1-17
March 5, 2021

Fear is paralyzing. It causes us to make bad decisions, robs us of our joy, and cripples us from living in the fullness of life that we are meant to live. We all experienced this during the pandemic and the world we live in would continue to hold us hostage to fear. Fear can lead to lying about ourselves whether it be on social media or even to our loved ones, it causes us to become physically sick in the stress and anxiety and creates, and it can even prevent us from trusting God's leading in our lives. Living by faith is the antithesis of fear.

Even though you could say I had really come to a personal faith in God in 7th grade, I recommitted my life to Christ as a sophomore in college. It was a time where I was ready to say to the Lord, I want to live my life for you and to honor you in every aspect of my life. I heard a talk on campus that stirred in me a reminder of what I had set aside when I got to college and became caught up in campus life. Getting up to go to church on Sunday morning took a little too much effort given my work load and the fact that Sunday morning came after Saturday night when I had typically been out late with friends. But the Lord stirred something deep within me that I knew needed to be addressed so I sought out a sorority sister who I knew had a deep and abiding faith. She became a close friend and confidant as I navigated that time of being strengthened in my walk with the Lord. One of the first things she did was invite me to church. She went to a little church right off

campus that we could reach easily on foot. It was a traditional service, not the big contemporary church many of the other students went to. But the minister there preached Biblically faithful sermons and it got me back to regular prayer and worship and to reading God's Word. It was a time of being filled with the love of God and experiencing a greater depth in relationships because they were forged in our walk with the Lord. Then, one morning in the fall of my junior year, walking to church, I sensed the voice of the Lord calling me to spend the next summer in the mission field. At the time I thought it was going to be my "summer for God". Fortunately, the Lord leads us one step at a time. I had no idea where, just that I was to go. The where and how was a discernment process, but by that winter I was signed up to go to Japan on a mission trip. I can remember my younger sister asking me, "Aren't you afraid?" And the question took me by surprise because it never even dawned on me to be afraid even though I knew nothing about the place I was going. Don't get me wrong it's not that I'm a particularly brave person. My college roommate who was an air force ROTC gave up on ever getting me to go sky diving with her. But when it came to doing something the Lord was so clearly calling me to, it didn't even dawn on me that there might be any reason to be afraid. I knew God loved me and trusted God would only call me into something good, something that

led to life in all its fullness, so I wasn't afraid or even worried.

While that time in Japan, both that summer and more than a year after college, was a time that stretched me, it was a wonderful time that I wouldn't trade for anything. It was a great adventure and a formational time of great spiritual and personal growth where the Lord was bringing me into a deeper walk with Him. It was an incredible gift.

When the Lord said to Abraham, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the Land that I will show you." Abraham went. The Bible takes fewer than four verses to tell the story of that call by God and Abraham's decision to go. Abraham knew nothing about where the Lord was leading Him. He would be led to a land that was hundreds of miles to the west in a time when people traveled on foot or on the backs of camels. Abraham couldn't look it up online or even refer to a map to see where he was going. He was being required to leave everyone and everything that was familiar to go to a place that was completely unknown. But he knew God was leading him and would be with Him and that was enough for Abraham. This is not the response of someone that simply believes in God. This is someone with a deep, trusting relationship with God. He knows God intimately and loves God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength, and that's where his trusting obedience comes from.

The story of the call of Abraham begins with an incredibly significant short statement that we tend to just breeze right past without thinking anything of it. "God said to Abraham." Those 4 words speak volumes. God spoke to Abraham and Abraham heard what God was saying. In other words, Abraham was accustomed to

talking with God. We call that prayer but prayer is listening as well as speaking. This was before any of Scripture was written so this isn't God speaking through His Word. This is God speaking directly to Abraham with a very specific instruction and promise; and Abraham's trust that he would be able to receive continued guidance and direction from God as the only directions he had to the place he was to go were those that God would give him along the way. That's faith. That's the kind of spiritual life that empowers and informs your life in the natural order. That's a faith that radically changes the way a person lives; and through living in that kind of faith Abraham would himself be abundantly blessed and all the nations of the earth would be blessed through him.

When God speaks to us, it's not an audible voice that anyone can hear. God speaks into our hearts and minds in a way that requires us to be paying attention and listening for God's voice and requires discernment for us to know that it's God who is speaking to us. It's an inner voice, what Elijah called a still small voice. Isn't it just like God, the almighty, infinite God to speak to us in a still small voice? When we are in a relationship with someone we love, we recognize their voice immediately. When we are in a relationship with the living God, the same thing holds true. We know God's voice and because we love God, know God's character, and know God loves us, we know it's a voice we can trust. And because we know God's ways are infinitely higher and better than our own, it's also a voice we obey.

So now let's look at our gospel lesson. Nicodemus has come to Jesus at night- a secret meeting under the cover of darkness. Nicodemus is a Pharisee. He is a keeper of the law and part of the leadership of the

Jewish people. While he would have been faithful to his religion as it was structured at the time, a personal relationship with God did not factor into that framework. The way the Jewish faith was practiced at the time was very different from the simple faith of Abraham when Abraham was reckoned as righteous because of his unwavering faith in God. As a Jew, Nicodemus was part of the Nation that was considered the people of God. He depended on the ordering of the law and the temple system of sacrifice for his sins to be forgiven, and he related to God as one of his people, not on a personal level. So Jesus' teachings were really quite radical, and the kind of relationship Jesus had and demonstrated in his life and ministry was highly unusual. Nicodemus was compelled by what he had heard and seen in Jesus to know more.

In his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus is using a Hebraic form of teaching involving a poetic play on words to portray the deeper meaning of the spiritual truths he is trying to help Nicodemus understand. In Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek the words are much less specific than in English. The word for Spirit also means wind or breath. The word for blow also means breathe. The word for sound also means voice. So as Jesus is using the illustration of the wind blowing where it chooses and you can hear the sound of it but you don't know where it comes from or where it's going it could also be that the Spirit is breathing as it chooses and you can hear the Spirit's voice. Jesus is calling Nicodemus to a way of living where his life in the natural order is empowered and informed by his spiritual life by being in

a personal relationship with God. It is such a different way of living it is like being born again- which also means to be born from above. Jesus is calling Nicodemus into a life that is God- breathed—God directed and God inspired. To live this way is to fully submit himself to living in the way God directs him—just like Abraham. But for someone who is looking to control life like the Pharisees this would have been like becoming an entirely new kind of creature.

Our Psalm for today, Psalm 121 speaks of this kind of absolute trust in God. It called a psalm of ascent or a song to take you higher- perhaps a psalm to direct you in being born from above. It is one of 15 psalms of ascent that were said or sung while climbing the 15 steps to the temple. I lift up my eyes to the hills, from where is my help to come? The question invites us to wonder- does it come from my wits? From my hard work or my financial resources? From my family or social connections? From the government or from good luck? No. My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. To depend on the Lord instead of on the things of this world is what it means to be born from above. Only in that eternal spirit- that life giving relationship with the living God can we find true safety. It is freeing and life giving- a new birth that only God can give. God calls us into this life on earth of being in relationship and communion with God now, as we will one day be in heaven. It's a foretaste of the joy that is to come. Who could ask for anything more?

Amen

