

Westminster Sermon – Light and Covenant  
Scripture Readings: Genesis 12:1-4, 26:4, John 3:1-9  
Sunday, February 25, 2024  
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Today we continue our Lenten journey together toward Holy Week. These 40 days of preparation commemorate the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness preparing for his ministry. In our first scripture reading from Genesis, chapter 12:1-4 and chapter 26:4, God calls Abraham and Sarah on their own journey into the wilderness with the promise of a new home and a covenant to make Abraham the father of many nations and offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven. We soon understand that this is an invitation to an inner spiritual journey as much as it is to a physical relocation. It is often when one takes the risk of leaving the familiarity and comfort of home and venturing into the unknown, that one discovers anew who one is and one's relationship to God. Abraham and Sarah follow God's initiative, they risk losing what they know in Ur to what they do not know in Canaan. They risk the possibility of a new light and covenant with God. Sarah's barrenness tells us that their life together in Ur was no longer "life-giving." For them to move on is to risk hope in the Promised Land, while to remain is to be without a future. Hear now God's Holy Word.

*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. 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." So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Amen.*

And later in Genesis 26:4 God's covenant to Abraham is confirmed to the next generation.

*I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands and all the nations of the earth shall gain blessing for themselves through your offspring, because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws. Amen.*

Our second scripture reading, John 3:1-9, introduces us to Nicodemus who in some ways represents the Abraham who is reluctant to leave Ur. Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night—indicating he doesn't want to risk being seen with Jesus in the daylight. When Jesus talks about being born anew or from above, Nicodemus' literalism causes him to become fixated on how a grown person can have a second birth experience rather than explore with Jesus the mystery of a spiritual rebirth. John doesn't tell us whether Nicodemus ever leaves Ur and moves into the light and covenant with Jesus, although later in the gospel Nicodemus defends Jesus, and helps prepare his body for burial. Perhaps on this night in the light of the stars Nicodemus takes the first step in risking beyond what he thought he knew. Listen to what the Spirit is saying:

*Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 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." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." 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?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 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." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Amen.*

The title of the sermon: “Covenant and Light”

*The text: “Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s home to the land that I will show you.’” Genesis 12:1 I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven...Genesis 26:4*

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, thank you for the light of your covenant calling each of us beyond what is familiar to risk with you in the unknown paths and adventures of life and faith. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The first time Peter and I took Paul skiing was in the wilderness of northern California at Lake Tahoe. Paul was 7 years old, and it was a totally new territory for him. I couldn’t help but think at the time what an advantage it was for Paul to learn the sport at a much younger age than I did. There seemed to be a trust and willingness to risk, to fall, and to get up again that was naturally building his self-confidence and preparing him for the more difficult slopes. He seemed at “home” on the mountain.

When Peter and I were not skiing with Paul that week, we were exploring the more difficult runs, slopes that Paul would eventually ski with grace and poise. At one intersection in the mountain a sign caught my eye titled “The Promised Land.” Right next to the proclamation was a large black diamond indicating this was an expert or most difficult run.

It was a poignant moment for me not because I was tempted to find my way down a black diamond ski slope to that particular Promised Land but because this sign captured the truth about our faith. Abraham and Sarah were not told that the journey to Canaan would be without risks any more than Nicodemus was told that to be reborn spiritually would not mean giving up some of what was comfortable and familiar to him.

*The Promised Land always lies on the other side of a wilderness.*

None of us can participate on our spiritual journey without loss and risk. None of us can reach the Promised Land without going through the wilderness or see the kingdom of God through Jesus’ eyes without having a spiritual rebirth.

I paused for a moment on that mountain to thank God for the beauty surrounding us and for the richness of our faith that, without apology, announces that the journey to the Promised Land is an expert or most difficult run. We are surrounded with the strength of our faith community, and yet we are called individually into the wilderness toward spiritual maturity. The way is never easy, sometimes fearful, and we can only count on ourselves and the gentle strength of God’s spirit to get us down that mountain.

The first step on this journey is a willingness to depart from our securities. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann suggests this about Genesis 12:

*The narrative knows that such departure from securities is the only way out of barrenness. The whole of the Abrahamic narrative is premised on this seeming contradiction: to stay in safety is to remain barren; to risk the unknown is to have hope. This is echoed in the invitation of Jesus: ‘For whoever would save one’s life will lose it; and whoever loses one’s life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.’*

The courage of Abraham and Sarah to risk the unknown made the light in their covenant with Yahweh possible through the generations in offspring as numerous as the stars in the heavens. This past Wednesday at Grace United Methodist Church, as Dale Rogers led us in singing “Father Abraham had many kids” with our Muslim and Jewish siblings, we celebrated being a part of God’s diverse and loving family, each one a bright and shining star. As Christians, we are a part of Abraham’s family through faith, by risking in accepting Jesus’ invitation to be born anew in the spirit.

To be born anew requires a willingness to be honest with ourselves and to take responsibility for our lives and the choices we make. The light of our covenant is personal accountability, meeting Christ under the stars and, also, in the light of day. This calls for a willingness to be confessional, to acknowledge our need for healing and forgiveness rather than blame others for our circumstances. Sometimes others are to blame; however, a healthy spirituality will be able to make the necessary distinctions so that healing can take place and personal responsibility can grow.

As Jesus longed for Nicodemus to be born anew, we, too, can move beyond a literalism and defensiveness to acknowledge that we are who we are today because of the choices we have made along the way. This insight empowers us on our journeys to make new, life-giving choices and to participate in the light and covenant of God’s call through Christ. We find the strength and nourishment of water and spirit on our journeys through the wilderness to the promised land.

Scottish novelist and poet William McElvaney in his book The Saving Possibility, reflects on the potential when one has the courage to follow God’s call into the way of light and covenant:

*... the way of the wilderness, the way of the unknown and the unmapped is always toward maturity, risk, discovery of self, responsible use of freedom. In that risk of the unknown, we have Christ’s promise that God’s spirit will light the way, sustain us, lead us and guide us...In the wilderness God’s promise of light and covenant is our only guarantee. When we learn again and again to rely on the light of God’s covenant, a strange thing happens. The wilderness is not the wilderness anymore. The wilderness has become the Promised Land.*

As we continue our Lenten journey, may we have the courage of Abraham and Sarah to risk the unknown, may we have the curiosity of Nicodemus to meet Christ under the stars, and may we have the faith to discover ourselves anew, as the Lamb of God lights the way. Amen.