

Scripture Readings and Sermon

March 8, 2020 by Rev. Mark Brechin

Commentary on Genesis 12:1–4a (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

The book of Genesis is like a telescoping lens that begins large but narrows its vision in three distinct phases. The first phase, creation, is dealt with in Chapter 1. The second phase, humanity, is addressed in Chapters 2-11 with the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, and the Tower of Babel. The final phase of Genesis focuses in on the descendants of Abram (Abraham) and will set the stage for Exodus. The call for Abram came very late in life but still the LORD promised to make his family into a great nation. It is to Abraham that both the Jewish and Muslim people trace their ancestry. Of note should be the fact that the LORD called Abram and not Lot.

Commentary on Romans 4:1–5, 13–17 (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

In Chapter 3, Paul argues that if righteousness comes from the Law then all are condemned for "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (3:24). If righteousness does not come by works or the law, then what - "the law of faith" (3:27). Righteousness is found "through faith in Jesus Christ" (3:22). This is not new, Paul argues, because Abraham was not made righteous because of his obedience to the Law since there was no Law yet but was made righteous by his faith in God. It was not the law that made Abraham obedient to God's call but his faith. "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." (4:3) Paul argues that if legal obedience is all that is required, then faith is null and the promises made to Abraham based on faith are void. Another way to frame Paul's argument is simply, what or who do you have faith in? If a person has faith in the law and rituals, then it is only by human power of adherence that one can be saved. If a person has faith in God, then it is only by the power of God's grace that one can be saved. Since the record of human history recorded in the Bible reveals the failure of human power and the persistence of God's grace, the object of faith should be self apparent.

Commentary on John 3:1–17 (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

After attending the wedding in Cana, Jesus makes his first trip to Jerusalem for the Passover. Upon entering the Temple, Jesus overturns the tables of the money changers and condemns the commercialization of Passover. It is after this, that Nicodemus comes to Jesus "by night". Was Nicodemus afraid to be seen with Jesus after the episode at the Temple? The Gospel of John is very symbolic and the reference to "night" may indicate Nicodemus' ignorance. Nicodemus is seeking the "light" at night. This is John's first reference to the "kingdom of God". In this context, the "kingdom" is the spiritual presence of God. Jesus clarifies being "born from above" or "born again" (both are valid translations of the Greek) as being born of "water and Spirit". In the context of the next verse, water can refer to the flesh as in a physical birth or symbolically a new birth through repentance in the context of baptism (see John the Baptist's discussion after this section). The interpretation of repentance links the phrase "water and Spirit" to "repent and believe" which other gospels link to the kingdom of God. Belief or faith which comes from the Spirit, then bridges this discussion with the story of the serpent and the wilderness and the statement "that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life". Linking belief with the Spirit is why so many fail to recognize Jesus in the Gospel of John. Belief is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

Sermon "Faith" (*Sermon Video*)

We all have secrets in our lives. Even after 35 years, I am still discovering secrets in my wife's life. Some are good and some leave me questioning. In a recent discussion with another minister, they told me not to let Satan encourage doubts to grow. Upon further reflections, many of my doubts are

rooted in my own self doubt. The scriptures today, however, call us to have faith.

John says that "who ever believes" and Paul writes that Abraham was considered righteousness not by works but by faith when God called. It is by faith that we begin our Christian journey. If the prodigal son never had faith in his father's goodness, he never would have left the pig sty. I am what I consider to be a moderate Christian humanist. I affirm the original goodness of God's creation as recorded in Genesis 1. Sin and brokenness has distorted and warped that goodness but all of humanity is originally good. It is faith in God's promise of goodness and the restoration of goodness that called me into ministry. While Wesley focused on those fleeing the wrath, I find myself focusing on seeking the goodness to come. For Jesus did not come to condemn but to save. Jesus was sent not out of anger or wrath but out of love. It is through faith in that love and salvation that grace restores our goodness.

Faith, however, is difficult to hold onto in a world surrounded by doubt and suspicion. Even Wesley after being "born from above" at Aldersgate struggled with faith. Asking a Moravian pastor how to gain deep faith, he was told "Preach faith until you have it and once you have it - preach it". While most people don't preach, the same applies to everyday life. Approach life by faith until you have it and once you have it, share that faith with others. Faith is a gift of the Spirit that blows through our lives. Like a sailor on a calm lake, we can not command the wind to blow but we can still raise our sails for when it does come. In prayer, we raise the sails of our hearts so that the Spirit may blow faith into our lives.

When we have faith, we find our salvation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We find that his righteousness wraps us up like the cloak given to the prodigal son when he returned home. As we learn to step out by faith like Abraham, we find that the blessing of faith soon becomes a blessing to others. In a community of faith, hope and love abide. In a community of doubt, despair and hate soon take root. After listening to God, the first step on the road away from temptation is having faith not only in God but in yourself and others as children of God.