

LENT 2, A – March 8, 2020  
SCRIPTURES – Genesis 12:1-9; Rom. 4:1-8, 13-17; John 3:1-17

*Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." John 3*

Our Scriptures today speak of and teach about faith. Held before us as a prime example of faith is Abram (whose name was later expanded to Abraham). What a man of faith! When God revealed Himself to him, Abram promptly did what God commanded: he gathered his wife, his nephew, and all that they had and left. He left his relatives... his friends and neighbors and community... his religion (the chief deity he and his neighbors in Haran worshiped was the moon god Sin)... everything. He left it all to travel to... well, he didn't know where! God simply promised that He would show him the land and bless him. Abram trusted Him, and he left. That was faith!

I'll bet this caused problems with the family members he left behind. They would talk, and wonder: *"Why did he leave? Who's this God who he said spoke to him? Does he think he's better than us?"* Well, Abram didn't forget them. Many years later, when he was seeking a wife for his son Isaac, he sent a servant back to his relatives in Haran to find a wife for him from among them. And his grandson, Jacob, married two women from there. The people of Israel were all descended from the 12 sons Jacob had.

Faith and family were very important for Abram, and were also important for his descendants, the people of Israel. *"Who are you descended from? What do you know about your family?"* Such questions were a regular topic of discussion, and argument, among the Jewish people. Are we that different? How often is family a topic of discussion at – or before, or after – gatherings? Who said what... what he or she did, even years ago... oh, how concerned we can be with such things! How they can unite, and also divide, us!

Well, the Pharisees of Jesus' day – students of the Bible and careful followers of God's laws – were particularly concerned with who you were descended from and how faithful they, and your relatives, were to God. And so, when Nicodemus – a Pharisee – came to Jesus and said to Him, ***"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him,"*** he expected that Jesus would acknowledge his wisdom in concluding this, and then enter into a discussion of His and His family's lives and actions.

***"Forget it!"*** That's how shocking Jesus' response – ***"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God"*** – was. Jesus credited Nicodemus with nothing. And what was so for him is also true for each of us. No family heritage or connections, and no good efforts or wisdom of your own bring you close to God. In fact, we are blind to God's presence and work and dead to Him until He gives

us life. ***“Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”*** As God alone creates life in the womb – you cannot take credit for your life, or the womb you came from, the family you were born into – so God alone can give us life with Him and enable us to see Jesus and His work!

What is faith? It is not your wise decision in choosing Jesus as your God, one made after weighing the evidence and considering your options. It is not your opening of your heart to Jesus, that He might love you and bless you. Faith is clinging to and crying out to God as your life, as a baby clings to and cries out to its mother. Faith is listening to and following God as your Father who loves you and supports you and leads you, as a child listens to and follows his father. Faith is life: given by God, and lived by you.

***“How can this be? Can a man enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”*** Nicodemus grasps the impossibility of Jesus’s blunt statement... and yet also doesn’t get it. How can he – and, how can you and I – be born into and live in God’s kingdom, seeing as we had nothing to do with our first birth, the one from our mothers? To get what Jesus was driving at, it is important to know some background... Nicodemus’ background.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, and the Pharisees were critical watchers and examiners of people; and especially of religious leaders. The Pharisees therefore went see and listen to John the Baptist when he began preaching and baptizing. They asked him questions and debated with him. But, they refused to be baptized by him. *“We don’t need it. We’re already God’s obedient and righteous ones!”* they declared. But, John had been sent by God to prepare the way for Jesus and the kingdom of God He was bringing. God declared this when John baptized Jesus, for then the Father spoke from heaven and witnessed to His Son and the Spirit came down upon Him. Jesus was focusing on that event when He told Nicodemus, ***“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”*** God’s kingdom was now in Jesus, and in His baptism! There the Father gave Him to us and joined Him to us. And, since His baptism joined Him to us sinners, it would lead to His death for sinners. ***“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”*** Baptism, then – Christ’s, and then yours into Him – is where God’s kingdom in Christ comes. It is where God brings us forth into life with Him; where He gives us birth into eternal life. To see, to be a part of, God’s kingdom you must be baptized into Jesus.

Faith is nothing other than living that life. And, because by baptism we are joined to Christ in His death and resurrection, faith in Jesus means dying and rising. God will work to put to death what is sinful and evil in you, and this will not be easy. As Abram was called to leave everything behind to go to where God would show him, so we are called to leave behind anything and everything that would hinder us on our journey to heaven. But, God will be with you to bless you and make you into a new person! Faith holds onto this, and receives God’s blessing in Christ.

Baptized into Jesus, you are a member of His family. His Father is your Father. The Holy Spirit who came down upon Him in His baptism came to you in your baptism. As the Spirit strengthened Jesus to endure even the cross, and then brought Him forth to life again in His resurrection, so the Holy Spirit will strengthen you to live a life of faith and, finally, bring you through your death to your resurrection with your Savior. His home in heaven will be your eternal home!

How can these things be? ***“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”*** Believe this, for God has done it! Through His Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.