

2 Lent
Genesis 12:1-4
Psalm 121
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17
John 3:1-17

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Grace and Peace to you all from God our strength and our redeemer – Amen.

In our gospel reading this morning, Nicodemus comes to Jesus with a set of convictions he wants to test – especially when it comes to what is actually possible in living out this life of faith as a disciple of Christ.

As we heard in John, Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, the ancient Jewish court system of his day. And as such, he was leader who was well versed in the laws of the Torah and the teachings that had come to governed his community's life up to this point.

He was a public leader who rested in his knowledge and ability to follow God's laws to their letter. After all, it was his job to hold and uphold the rules of his people as it was the Sanhedrin who provided legal counsel and even placed charges against those who had broken God's law.

And so, he thought he had this whole faith thing figured out.

Which is likely why Nicodemus had such an adverse reaction to Jesus teaching today when he shared that experiencing the kingdom of God isn't necessarily about following the rules, our own knowledge, or even our place within our community of faith – it's about being open to the untameable wonder of God's coming kingdom right now within our life and world.

For Nicodemus – his faith and his life as a child of God had always been a calculated equation for which he had the "right" answer.

By today's standards, he would have likely been known as someone with a Type "A" personality. He was disciplined and orderly. He knew the rules and he liked to follow them. If given a coloring sheet – Nicodemus would have asked for the required color listing before happily and carefully coloring inside the lines.

And so, it is no surprise that he continues to cling to what he knows – quite literally - even when his rabbi and teacher tells him its spoiling his ability to hear and receive the truth of the one speaking to him from God.

Then again, perhaps we are not so different ourselves.

A few years ago, when I shared this text with some young people during a children's sermon, the idea of being born again seemed equally as ridiculous to them as it did to Nicodemus. When we got to the part of the story where Nicodemus is confused about his call to be born again a three-year-old yelled out *"I'm not going back in there"* while their older sibling replied *"you wouldn't fit! Plus, you couldn't even see anything!"*

We all laughed and then somehow understood that perhaps we were more like Nicodemus then we wished we were.

We all like to think we have this faith thing figured out to some degree.

We take comfort in the fact that we can have faith in God.

We can trust in the rules we have come to know and the promises we have come to hold as children of the creator of all.

But that doesn't free us from the temptation to think that somehow, if we only tried hard enough, we could simply free ourselves from this need for God to save us at all.

That we don't actually need this season of lent - or any opportunity to be reshaped and reformed as God's people because we are doing okay.

So, we are tempted like Nicodemus to call out to Christ saying "we don't any more spiritual pointers on the promises of God - we have got this whole Christian thing figured out."

And maybe this is because sometimes we find God's promises truly hard to believe for ourselves.

Throughout the scriptures we encounter story after story where our human knowledge meets God's truth in miraculous and absurd ways. We can all likely recall a few stories from the scriptures where God's promises seemed laughable, if not completely impossible in the midst of life's circumstances – but yet they turned out to be true. And so, there are two stories I'd like to lift up beside that of Nicodemus this morning:

Firstly, I can't help but think of the story of Sarah's life on international women's day. Sarah the great matriarch of the faith – she had always dreamed of bearing a child with Abraham but her body had aged well beyond the years of childbirth. When she and Abraham were visited the by three strangers one day, she overhears the promise of the Spirit, "You will have a son in your old age." And she laughed at God in outright disbelief – yet she became the mother of God's people, her descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky.

Secondly, I'd like to lift up the story of the unnamed women who were shocked to find an empty tomb when they returned to prepare Jesus body with holy spices. When heavenly beings confirmed that Christ was risen from the dead, they were tasked to tell this news to all who would listen. But when they shared the truth of Christ's resurrection – the women were laughed out of the room and scolding by the disciples for telling "idle tales". Yet, these women were truly the first to proclaim one of the greatest of God's promises for us all.

So perhaps we are in good company when it comes to the real resistance we experience when we hear and share God's promises proclaimed before us now. No matter how outlandish they might sound.

Maybe it's okay to rest in the midst of our questions and our doubts this Lenten season as we learn to lean into the promises of God even if we can't fully understand them for ourselves now.

And when we become too sure of what we think we know about God, may that be when we are confronted again like Nicodemus, Sarah, or the women at Jesus tomb, with one of the most outrageous promises God:

"Yes, God so loved the world as to give the Only Begotten One, that whoever believes may not die, but have eternal life."

It's a promise that tells us that in the midst of our doubts and frustrations with this life of faith that we can be certain that Christ will come to meet us where we are, proclaiming this promise again and again until we can hear it and hold it in our own way.

And maybe that is a part of our Lenten journey this season – to allow for the soil of our faith to be overturned – breaking the old and harmful narratives of this world that have told us that we have to have it all figured out – and making room for the fullness of the promises of God here and now.

Promises that are at work within us all creating, re-orienting, and reshaping us constantly to know we are beloved, named, and claimed children of God.

So, may we be open to the untameable wonder of God's coming kingdom right here and now.

May we know the promises we have received from God into the depths of our soul.

And may we be sent out to share those promises within our world.

May this be so among us – Amen.