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Second Sunday in Lent
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Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA

If you were listening carefully to the first and second lessons this morning, you might be wondering (as I was when I read them), what does Abraham have to do with Lent? And for that matter, what does Nicodemus have to do with Lent?

The short answer has to do with what Christians believe Jesus actually *accomplished* with his death and resurrection. Another way of getting at this is to ask, what *changed* as a result of Jesus' death and resurrection. Or, yet another way, how is our world *different* as a result of what he did? For the early followers of Jesus, one of the most important things that changed were the *boundaries* marking out who counts as a full and equal member of the people of God. Before Jesus, the boundary was primarily marked out by one's birth into a Jewish family, and after Jesus for Christians it was primarily marked out by faith in Jesus.

This being said, the long answer is a bit more complicated—you'd be surprised if I told you anything else, right? It's complicated by early polemical tensions between the first Jews who followed Jesus and later by these Christian Jews and the Jews who didn't follow Jesus, and then these later tensions were exacerbated by 2000 years of deepening hostility and misunderstanding on all sides. And, naturally, Paul's writings were at the heart of these tensions, so we'll start there.

Recall that as a young man Paul was a Pharisee, and as such he was a strict follower of the Torah, the Jewish law. The Jewish law was and remains a combination of Jewish ritual and moral teachings or, more generally, the Jewish way of life. The Torah is for Jews what Jesus has become for Christians—it is that

important. What was distinctive about Paul's conversion to following Jesus was that, in it, he simultaneously received a calling or a vocation to take the message of Jesus to the gentiles. There were a few gentile Christians before Paul's conversion, but early church leaders, who were Jewish themselves, debated whether gentile converts had to follow the Jewish law in order to be a true follower of Jesus. And remember that it was Jesus himself who openly proclaimed he was called primarily to his own people, so the Jewish Christian leaders who were arguing with Paul had a strong point in their favor. Again, at issue was whether and, if so, to what extent, the gentile followers of Jesus needed to observe the Jewish law. This is where Abraham becomes very important to Paul's argument. Why? Because Abraham was called by God long before Moses, the great lawgiver, was on the scene and thus long before the law was being used to mark the boundaries of the Jewish way of life.

Recall in the lesson from Genesis what God said to Abraham, then called Abram, when God called him out of his own land and family to a new land and a new faith in the one God. "I will make of you a great nation..." All Jews knew this story and believed it, but Paul seized on the second part of God's promise to Abraham, namely, that in Abraham "all the families of the earth shall be blessed." In that important passage that we read this morning from Romans, Paul is appealing to this story of Abraham's calling and covenant with God to advance two arguments. The first, which other Jewish Christians also believed, was that Jesus' death and resurrection was the way God would somehow fulfil this promise to Abraham that all the world would be blessed. Thus, *that* gentiles would be included in the people of God was not the problem. The problem was *how* they would be included. So, second, and against many other Jewish Christian leaders—

most notably Jesus' own brother, James, who was the very influential leader of the very influential Jerusalem church—Paul was making a further argument. Paul was using Abraham to argue that gentiles didn't need to follow the Jewish law *in order to* be included in the people of God (Paul made one exception to this second argument which I mention only in passing—he required gentile Christians to keep the *moral* portions of the law, but not the ritual portions). In any case, it is in this second part of his argument where Paul's emphasis on Abraham's *faith* becomes key for so much of what followed in Christian history and theology. Essentially, Paul is saying that Abraham was justified by his faith in God long before God gave the law to Moses, and he quotes another portion of Genesis (15:6) to back up his argument, namely, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." And just as Abraham was justified by faith, so—Paul argued—can gentile Christians.

Now I want to pause here. We don't to perpetuate the same misunderstandings that other Christians have done in the past, so let's be sure we understand what Paul is saying. Paul is *not* saying the Torah is a bad thing or that it's been set aside—Jesus himself said he came to fulfil the law, not destroy it. Paul *is* saying that God's promise to include gentiles in the people of God does not *depend* on their following the law. He goes on, "For this reason it [i.e., righteousness and inclusion in the people of God] depends on faith, in order that the promise [to Abraham] may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law [i.e., Jews] but also to those who share the faith of Abraham [i.e., both Jews and the new gentile followers of Jesus]" (Romans 4:16). This was still controversial for many early Christian Jews, even though it is consistent with traditional Jewish teaching in that Jews don't

typically require conversion to Judaism in order for gentiles to be deemed righteous. But again, it's not a claim that God set the law aside the law or, indeed, that God set Jews aside because they follow the law—Jews who follow the law do so in faith that God called *Moses* as well as Abraham. Paul is simply arguing, based on the example of Abraham's faith prior to the giving of the law by Moses, that gentiles do not need to follow the *ritual* portions of the law in order to be followers of Jesus—again, elsewhere Paul does require them to follow the *moral* portions of the law.

So perhaps we now have a clue as to why the story of Nicodemus is included with these readings from Genesis and Romans. His story is filtered through the lens of the author of John's Gospel, an author who was a times seems particularly hard on "the Jews" who rejected Jesus. Nevertheless, Nicodemus is a faithful Jew who, as a Pharisee like Paul, is wondering how Jesus and his teachings fit into God's promises for the Jewish people. Being "born from above" or, in earlier translations, being "born again," is another way of talking about the faith required for inclusion in the people of God. John seems to understand faith as a particular, perhaps even a peculiar, way of *seeing*. Jesus tells Nicodemus, "...no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." This way of seeing allows one to perceive Jesus as key to participating in or entering into the kingdom of God. What Jesus seems to be saying to Nicodemus, the Pharisee—and a good Pharisee, by the way—is, I think, close to what Paul is arguing in Romans. We might phrase it this way: going through the motions of any religion—staying within the traditional and inherited boundaries of its rituals and moral rules may be all well and good, but it should not be equated with a living relationship with the one living God—a relationship "from the heart," as a long line of Jewish

prophets before Jesus discussed it. This relationship requires a special way of seeing, a certain understanding of faith as an experience of God's presence, and it's potentially available to all human beings. For Christians, this experience of God it's mediated through Jesus and effected by his death and resurrection.

The bottom line, to bring this home for us in our Lenten preparations, is that we Christians can get caught in the same religious traps that Paul accused the earlier Jewish Christians of being trapped in, and that Jesus seems to be suggesting Nicodemus is also trapped in—namely, don't mistake the teachings, the rituals, and the moral codes of our religion for the experience of the presence of the living God. Again, neither Jesus nor Paul is setting aside Jewish teachings, rituals, or moral codes—they are still in place and still important—but they are not the same thing as a living faith that would take us, with Abraham, to a new country or that, with Nicodemus, would permit us to see the kingdom of God in our midst. That's what God is offering us through Jesus, and it is an offering to all humans: God's living and loving presence in our hearts, if only we have the faith to see it and the grace to experience it. Amen.