

Sermon Notes from the Church’s Ministry Among Jewish People
Second Sunday in Lent – Year A

RCL Readings – Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17.

ACNA Readings – Genesis 12:1-9; Psalm 33:12-21; Romans 4:1-17; John 3:1-16.

Introduction. While last week’s readings called out our sin and need of repentance, this week’s readings point us to the righteous remedy for our sickness. We are all infected by the bite of the Serpent. We need only look on the crucified Messiah and trust that by his wounds our sinful hearts are healed (Isa 53:5).

Common Theme. Without faith or trust it is impossible to please God, for whoever would draw near to God “must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Heb 11:6). We see in Abraham God’s model of pleasing faith. Abraham did no legalistic work to earn his righteous status. He simply heard the voice of God, believed it was God, and trustingly did what he told him. We are all called to do the same. Through this simple faith God restores to humans the eternal life lost by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Abraham’s faith is also the conduit for God blessing all the rebellious nations scattered at Babel and restoring them to right relationship with their Creator. What must the nations believe? That God’s instrument of healing and restoration is the Son of Man hung on a tree. Can we trust the foolishness of God for our healing or does the wisdom of humanity get in the way?

Genesis 12:1-9. Up to this point in Genesis, the text has given us the origin story of all of humanity. In chapter 11, the story begins to zoom in on the descendants of Noah and his son Shem, and his descendant Eber – from which comes *Hebrew* – to his descendant Terah. It is Terah who moved his family from Ur and headed for Canaan. But they stopped short and settled in Haran – today on the border of Turkey and Kurdistan. Now, in chapter 12, God calls Abram son of Terah to follow through and keep going to Canaan.

Why has God called Abram to a new land? What is the context of the promise “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:3)? In chapter 10, we learn the names of all the families of the earth, the 70 proto-nations that rebel against God’s command to spread out and populate the earth. Instead, they stay together and try to make their name great by building a great ziggurat at Babel.¹ God thwarts the building project by creating different languages and so *encourages* everybody to disperse. We are left with a question at the end of the Babel story: Is God through with humanity? Is he done wrestling with the nations?²

In the call of Abram – renamed Abraham in Gen 17:5 – the answer is a resounding *No! Heaven forbid!* God loved the nations in this way: he called Abraham to bless the wayward and rebellious nations of

¹ Faithlife, LLC. “Tower of Babel.” *Logos Bible Software*, Computer software. Logos Bible Software Factbook. Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, LLC, Retrieved 18 February 2023. <https://ref.ly/logos4/Factbook?ref=bk.%24TowerOfBabel>.

² Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 1963), 151, as quoted in Christopher J.H. Wright. *The Mission of God* (InterVarsity Press), 198-199. Kindle Edition.

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Genesis 10 and 11. God chooses Israel to be a light to all the nations of the earth.³ Now these 70 families have become as many as 24,000 ethnolinguistic⁴ groups, all in need of God's blessing.

As the Abraham story continues, we will see God continue to zoom in, from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob then to Judah then David. The scepter will not depart from Judah (Gen 49:10) and the throne will not depart from David (2 Sam 7). God is electing in order to bless all the nations who rebelled at Babel. They will be blessed through the seed of Abraham, the son of David.

When Abraham makes it to Canaan, the LORD promises the land to Abraham's descendants, and Abraham believes. We know he believes in this passage because he builds a memorial altar to God and "called upon the name of the LORD" (Gen 12:8). All who call on the name of the LORD are saved (Joel 2:32).

Psalm 121. This Psalm of Ascent would have been sung by Jewish pilgrims on the way to the temple. They are reminding themselves to trust the LORD for safety. God guards (שמר) all the nation of Israel and does not stop and so he sees and guards the faithful pilgrim traveling in obedience to worship (Exod 23:14-17).

The theme of our lectionary readings is God's faithfulness and blessing to the nations through Abraham. God's unsleeping faithfulness to Israel is a sign to the nations. It is said that King Louis XIV of France asked philosopher Blaise Pascal to prove the existence of God. Pascal's answer: "Well, Your Majesty, the Jews! The Jews!"⁵ After infanticides, inquisitions, pogroms, and even the Holocaust, the Sons of Jacob continue as a people group. God is faithful to Israel for the sake of Abraham, his friend (Isa 41:8-9). He chose Abraham as a sign of hope that the nations' rebellion against their Creator was not the final word on their relationship with God.

Romans 4:1-17. In the Letter to the Romans, Paul is addressing a mixed congregation of Jews and Gentiles in Rome who likely are at odds on how to worship and have table fellowship together. The Jewish disciples of Jesus know "salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:21), and the Gentile believers know they are free from the requirements of Torah (Acts 15). Paul is writing to remind them that they are all equal before God. Whether they have Torah or not, all have sinned and come short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23).

³ Wright, *Mission of God*, 263, 329.

⁴ "How Many People Groups Are There?" Joshua Project, n.d. Retrieved 18 February 2023.
https://joshuaproject.net/resources/articles/how_many_people_groups_are_there.

⁵ "Does the Existence of Israel Prove the Existence of God? (Ezekiel's Parable of the Dry Bones)." *ONE FOR ISRAEL Ministry*, 30 June 2016. Retrieved 18 February 2023.
<https://www.oneforisrael.org/bible-based-teaching-from-israel/ezekiel-37-parable-of-the-dry-bones/>.

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Paul continues this line of reasoning by now using Abraham as an example. As we saw in the Genesis passage above, Abraham is called from among the rebellious nations. Abraham trustingly answers God's call and travels to Canaan. In Genesis 15, Abraham cries out to God for an heir. And God "brought him outside and said, 'Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them. So shall your offspring be.' And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:5-6). Abraham did not live by legalistic works. He wasn't made righteous because he followed rules and regulations. He had a relationship of trust with God. He listened and believed what God told him. This pleased God. In hearing and believing, Abraham does the opposite of what Adam and Eve did, of what the nations at Babel did. They did not believe what they heard from God, and it grieved him. Abraham's trust is credited as righteousness because he dares to walk with God without shame and without fear.

Paul goes on to say that Abraham's model of faith makes him the father of all who believe whether Jew or Gentile. This thought is not foreign to Judaism. Maimonides, in his "Letter to Ovadyah the Proselyte," assures the recipient that

because Avraham avinu [our father] revealed the true faith and the unity of God, rejected idol-worship, and brought many children under the wings of the Sh'khinah. Ever since then whoever adopts Judaism and confesses the unity of the Divine Name, as prescribed in the Torah, is counted among the disciples of Avraham avinu, peace unto him. In the same way as he converted his contemporaries through his words and teaching, he converts later generations through the testament he left his children and household after him. Thus Avraham avinu is the father of his pious posterity who keep his ways, and the father of his disciples and of all proselytes who adopt Judaism.⁶

What is different between Paul the Pharisee and Maimonides is that Paul has heard, acknowledged, and believed the revelation of God in the risen Jesus the Messiah. On the road to Damascus, Paul realizes that the Age to Come has begun. The Seed of David, the long-awaited Messiah, will not only gather the lost sheep of the house of Israel but he will gather the nations as well. The fulfillment of the promises in the Prophets of the nations worshiping YHWH has begun (e.g. Isa 19:23-25, Zech 14:16, Micah 4:1-2)!

John 3:1-17. Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrein (John 7:50). "Some have identified him with Nakdimon ben-Gurion, mentioned in the Talmud as a wealthy merchant at the time of the Second Temple and its destruction. Even if he is not the same, we learn at least that this Greek name was used by Jews."⁷

⁶ As quoted in David H. Stern. Notes on Romans 4:16, *Jewish New Testament Commentary: A Companion Volume to the Jewish New Testament* (Clarksville, MD: Messianic Jewish Communications, 1992). Kindle Edition.

⁷ Stern, Notes on John 3:1, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*.

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Nicodemus (and others) recognize that Jesus' miraculous works have to be from God. So Jesus gives him a teaching: "Yes, indeed," Yeshua answered him, "I tell you that unless a person is born again from above, he cannot see the Kingdom of God" (v.3 CJB). Jesus continues to explain that one must be born of water and the Spirit, as in Ezekiel 36:25-28, where God promises to sprinkle Israel with clean water and give them a new heart. Perhaps Nicodemus missed or forgot the childbirth metaphors in the Prophets (e.g. Isa 26:17-19; 66:7-14; Hos 13:13-14). "A teacher of Israel should have recognized such a vital theme, especially as it is conveyed so clearly in imagery from Ezekiel. Instead, we leave Nicodemus stammering his question, How?"⁸ Nicodemus has perceived God's hand in Jesus' ministry, but he questions instead of believing the word of Jesus. He fails to follow Abraham's example of trust. "The signs have shown him that Jesus has come from God, yet he does not receive Jesus' teaching as teaching come from God."⁹ We know Nicodemus' faith will come along as he publicly assists in Jesus' burial (John 19:39).

Nicodemus' unbelief reveals that he does not yet see Jesus as more than a teacher. So Jesus makes his identity plain: "No one has gone up into heaven; there is only the one who has come down from heaven, the Son of Man." Jesus is telling this teacher of Israel that he is the divine figure in Daniel 7:13-14 who approaches the Ancient of Days and is given dominion over all the nations of the earth. He is also saying he is the Messiah and the Vindicated Innocent who will initiate the day of redemption.¹⁰ It is this last aspect that leads Jesus to talk about being "lifted up" as the serpent in the wilderness.

Jesus uses the title Son of Man when he speaks of his death (cf. Luke 9:44) because "he embraced a Jewish idea ... that the unjust death of an innocent individual (see Luke 23:47) will not go unnoticed by God and can even precipitate the day of redemption with divine vengeance."¹¹ But why this strange image of the serpent on a pole? In Numbers 21, the Israelites spoke out against God and Moses. The consequence was a plague of poisonous snakes. For their healing, the children of Israel were called to an act of trust: merely looking at a bronze snake on a pole. How many thought this was idiotic and so died in their rebellion?

⁸ Rodney A. Whitacre, *John*, vol. 4 of The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 1999), 89.

⁹ Whitacre, *John*, 89.

¹⁰ For a thorough discussion of the title Son of Man, see Randall Buth, "'Son of Man': Jesus' Most Important Title." JerusalemPerspective.com, 1 March 1990. Retrieved 18 February 2023. <https://www.jerusalemerspective.com/2471/> and R. Steven Notley, "Jesus and the Son of Man," JerusalemPerspective.com," 1 January 2004. Retrieved 18 February 2023. <https://www.jerusalemerspective.com/4431/>.

¹¹ Notley, "Jesus and the Son of Man."

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Death came to humanity through a tree, so eternal life comes through a strange tree. Genesis says the Tree of Knowledge and Good and Evil was “good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes” (Gen 3:6). Could it be that the Tree of Life was not as pleasing to the eye, that it looked as bizarre as a dead snake on long staff or as a man nailed to a Roman cross? Jesus is telling Nicodemus and the whole world that the healing of our rebellious hearts – inherited from Adam and Eve and the nations at Babel – lies in looking on the Messiah hung on a tree and believing that he is God’s salvation. We – Jew and Gentile – only have to look and believe, as Abraham looked at the Land of Canaan and at the stars in the sky and believed God’s promises.

ACNA Reading

Psalm 33:12-21. This psalm extends blessing to a nation (עַמֵּי הַגּוֹיִם *goy*) who takes the LORD as its God. It may be easy to see verse 12 speaking specifically about the nation of Israel, but verse 13 tells us that the LORD looks on all of humanity. The psalmist reminds us that no army can save a king, nor can any horse – or war machine – save anyone. Neither can building the tallest ziggurat or skyscraper bring lasting glory or bring anyone into the presence of God. The only source of faithful salvation and entry into friendship with God is fearing the LORD and trusting in his mercy.

About the author. The Rev. Cariño Casas is the Executive Director of CMJ USA and is helping churches build bridges with their Jewish neighbors. She joined the CMJ family in 2014 as the media coordinator of Christ Church Jerusalem. She has a Master of Arts in Biblical Studies from Trinity School for Ministry and a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism from Texas A&M University. She is the deacon at Grace Anglican Church in Edgeworth, Pennsylvania.