

20100308 Sermon preached at St Andrews, Gisborne

Send your Spirit among us, O God, as we meditate on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Prepare our minds to hear your Word. Move our hearts to accept what we hear. Purify our will to obey in joy and faith. This we pray through Christ our Saviour. Amen.

Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:1-17

Faith in God – from below or from above?

Our Lenten journey continues. Last week, we explored something significant in Jesus' faith journey as well as in our journey. Do you remember what it was? ...

This week, the theme is 'faith in God' – with this question 'from below or from above?' The two readings from Genesis and John present two different cases of faith in God – Abram and Nicodemus. What we'll see about their faith is through this question – 'from below or from above?' The working definition is like this; a faith from below means that it is a person's initiative. A faith from above then implies that it is God's initiative. So we'll see the faith journey of Abram first, and next Nicodemus'. After that, we'll think about what the faith in God from below or from above means us today.

1. The faith of Abram in Genesis 12:1-4a – from below or from above?

Is anyone who is seventy-five at the moment? And if you are asked to move from New Zealand to an unknown country/land, what would you feel like? ... It may not be easy. Even for me moving from Dunedin to Gisborne was not easy. But this was what happened to Abram.

At the age of seventy-five, Abram was told to go to unknown land while leaving his kindred and his father's house behind. We don't know much about Abram. A brief story of his family background appears in Genesis 12:31. That is, his father's name is Terah, who was descendent of Sham. Sham was one of the sons of Noah. It was Terah - Abram's father who took his son Abram and his grandson Lot to Haran where they settled. The call of Abram happened far before people came to know about God (*Adonai Elohim*). We only presume that the new land to which Abram was supposed to go may have been full of totemism - idolatries.

So from these people – Abram, Sarai¹ and Lot, we don't see anything special apart from their advanced age and barrenness. In fact this passage is not so much a story about these three people but a story about God, who is the central figure in this account. It is *Adonai Elohim* (YHWH), the Lord, who calls to Abram² and tells him to go and leave the country and kindred and father's house and to trust in God to show the way. We may ask why Abram, not anyone else.

By the time we meet Abram, there had already been many disastrous things happened on earth from the perspectives of God. Some of them were - the eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge (Genesis 3), Cain's killing of his brother Abel (Genesis 4), violence filling the earth prior to the flood (Genesis 6:1-7), and building the tower of Babel (Genesis 11) to name a few. What these stories tell us is that how human beings rebelled against their Creator and the consequences of judgment that follow. But at the same time, it also shows us that the continued blessing of God that seeks to address humanity in spite of divine judgment. The calling of Abram comes after this. The blessing given to Abram has three important features. 1) land (v1b); 2) making Abram a great nation and making his name great (v.2), and 3) through Abram all the families of the earth shall be blessed. In the ancient Near East, this type of treaty was a gift that a god would bestow on a favoured subject or king. They were unilateral, meaning that the blessing flowed in one direction from the giver to the recipient. They were also unconditional.³ So what do you think about Abram's faith? Was it from below by his initiative or from above by God?

2. The faith of Nicodemus in John 3:1-17 – from below or from above?

In John's gospel, we meet a person named Nicodemus. He is a Pharisee and the leader of the Jew. It means that he has great knowledge in Hebrew scriptures and the Law. He comes to Jesus by night, that means he may not wish to be seen by anyone. And he begins with these words; “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God” (v2). To this, Jesus replies with these enigmatic words. “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” (John 3:3). Here we meet an important word ‘from above’ (ἄνωθεν

¹ Abram means ‘high father’, while Sarai means ‘my princess.’

² Abram's name is changed to Abraham (Father of multitude) in Genesis 17:5 while Sarai's is changed to Sarah (mother of nations) in Genesis 17:15-16.

³ Another example can be found in 2 Samuel 7:8-16 when the Lord's promises to David.

anōthen) in Greek. The thing is that ἄνωθεν anōthen can be translated in three different ways – 'again, anew, or from above.' Nicodemus hears only the first option as his questions indicate⁴ - while Jesus' continuing words show, he meant it as 'from above.' In John's gospel, especially, one's identity depends on the place from which one comes and the place to which one goes. Jesus uses this word 'ἄνωθεν anōthen' to be born 'from above,' which means to be part of the new reality that Jesus brings.⁵ The remaining meaning of anōthen, which are 'anew' and 'again', can also be added. We actually need all of them!!

In this postmodern world, even we Christians may often think that the meaning of 'born from above' (anōthen) by emphasizing a personal decision for Christ that results in a new birth as if the action is ours. But faith is primarily the action of God. When we say that we are saved by grace, it is when God is in action of faith from above. Nicodemus tries very hard to understand what Jesus tells him. His knowledge as the teacher of the Law isn't very helpful. He doesn't admit his ignorance or unfaith in God either. He is not able to recognize what Jesus offers, and more importantly, who Jesus is. He comes to Jesus by night, and he remains in the darkness. His faith is his own – from below. So what about us?

3. What do these faith stories tell us today? – Is our faith from below or above?

We have thought about the faith of Abram and the faith of Nicodemus so far. What we found is that Abram's faith is given by God - from above while Nicodemus's is from below through his understanding and knowledge of scriptures. Here it is important to note that in John's gospel, faith is not just a static thing. We tend to talk about 'our faith' or 'having faith' as if faith is something we can possess. But it is not the case, especially in John's gospel. Faith in the Fourth gospel is not a possession that one has or gets, but it is something that one does since faith is always a verb form. As such believing is subject to all of the ambiguity, the uncertainty, and the indecisiveness of being human. It means that there is no way we can compare our faith with others'. But at the same time, it also allows us to ask faith questions – 'how can these things be?' as Nicodemus does here. It also shows that we don't make this faith journey by ourselves. The Holy Spirit is always with us. The faith in God is continually

⁴ John 3:4 - "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

⁵ The idea of rebirth occurs frequently in the New Testament (Romans 6:1-11; 1 Corinthians 3:1-2; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15; Ephesians 4:22-24; Titus 3:5; Hebrews 5:12-14; 1 Peter 1:3, 22-23).

growing until all of us come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. ⁶ It because faith is always active, living, permeable and dynamic, which is led by the Holy Spirit.

How do we understand faith from these two different stories? Where can we find ourselves in these texts? May God help us find answers in Lent, and we'll finish it with prayer.

The Lord of Lent, we are reminded this week of God's unconditional promises that are directed to us, not through our merit. Bless us with the remarkable gift of life, especially when our present circumstances point to states of barrenness. Help us address our particular conditions and needs whenever things arise. Help us live by faith like Abram so that we can go as the Lord asks. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.

⁶ Ephesians 4:13