

Eli Gravert - Rebirth
March 16

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

On this second Sunday in Lent, we continue our Lenten journey. The theme that jumped out upon my initial reading was: “Calling.” I had all these wonderful words about how this church in particular has shown the fruits of embracing calling. But as I read and reread the scriptures, the theme of rebirth seemed to reshape my message. Of course, through my studying I found the words translated as being born “again” can also be translated as being born “from above.”

I found myself mirrored in the character of Nicodemus—stumbling over to Jesus’ house in the middle of the night and asking Him, “So, this rebirth thing, how big of a deal is this, REALLY?” I mean, Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a leader in the synagogue, one who knows all the rules for what it means to be a good Jew. I guess what I’m saying is that yeah, I have been baptized, and I was reborn, and I stumbled through some temptations, and then righted myself back on the straight and narrow, and then some stumbling happens and I’m right back in front of Jesus’ door asking, “Do I REALLY need to be reborn?” And He replies, “Of course you do, stop being such a knucklehead and pay attention.” And then you can almost hear the call of Abraham whispered in the next line, “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know from where it comes or where it will go. So it is with the Spirit of God.” I’ve read (because I haven’t studied Greek) that this is a fascinating play on words in the Greek text. The words for wind and Spirit are interchangeable.

A few weeks ago I learned quite a bit about the power of wind. Over in Highland a small tornado picked up our machine shed at work and left pieces of sheet metal and lumber scattered over the next few fields. What a powerful and humbling experience that can be. Then yesterday, as my mother and her husband Terry were helping me move, we were grateful for the wind that was giving a light breeze while we were catching our breath, between loads up the stairs—a very different experience of wind. The main thing about wind is that it always is in motion, it is not stagnant. It is active. It moves.

We read those words in Genesis about Abram being called to pick up and go somewhere to make a great nation—presumably, wherever the Spirit of God will lead him. If we rewind a few verses, in Genesis 11:29-30 we can see that his wife is barren. Here is another instance where life is renewed by the Spirit. God makes a promise of a great nation out of an older couple who has proven to be barren. What a seemingly hopeless and soon to be dead nation! I won’t ask to see a show of hands for the couples out there who look forward to start having children after the age of 75. And yet, what does Abram do? He steps out by his faith.

Saint Caesarius, a bishop of Arles, France, for forty years in the late 400s/early 500s, promoted the belief that God put the exercise of love within every man’s reach and gave a sermon which explains Abram’s call as a process of rebirth. “Therefore if what happened corporally in Abraham was written for us, we will see it fulfilled spiritually in us if we live piously and justly. ‘Leave your country,’ the Lord said, ‘your kinsfolk and your father’s house.’ We believe and perceive all these things fulfilled in us, brothers, through the sacrament of baptism. Our land is

our body, we go forth properly from our land if we abandon our carnal habits to follow the footsteps of Christ. Does not one seem to you happily to leave his land, that is, himself, if from being proud he becomes humble; from irascible, patient; from dissolute, chaste; from avaricious, generous; from envious, kind; from cruel, gentle? Truly, brothers, one who is changed thus out of love for God happily leaves his own land.” (*Sermon 81.1*).

This is what Paul is trying to tell us! If we could be justified by our works, we are simply getting what is owed to us, it's not any sort of grace. Just as Abraham stepped out in faith after receiving God's call, so too must we start off with faith.

** Origen says, “Faith, which believes in the justifier, is the beginning of justification before God” (in other words, that the beginning of redemption starts with believing in God, the redeemer). And this faith, when it is justified (redeemed), is like a root in the soil of the soul, which the rain has watered, so that as it begins to grow by the law of God, branches appear, which bring forth fruit. The root of righteousness does not spring from works, rather the fruit of works grows from the root of righteousness, namely by that root of righteousness by which God brings righteousness to one whom has accepted apart from works.” (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*). It takes the seed of faith to become a part of God's promise, nothing more, and nothing less. As it grows, there may be works that are rooted in the faith, but faith is the only necessity to receive God's promise.

And what does this faith grant us? We can look at the remainder of the Gospel message and see that it grants us access to the Son of God, the ultimate symbol of love for the world—a symbol that is not of condemnation, but of love!—a promise to all nations.

Then in those dark nights that follow our rebirth, we may find ourselves in the midst of Psalm 121, upon Jesus' doorstep, being reminded of the Lord's promise. The same God who created the whole world has promised to keep us.

Martin Luther King Jr: “When we are staggered by the chilly winds of adversity and battered by the raging storms of disappointment and when through our folly and sin we stray into some destructive far country and are frustrated because of a strange feeling of homesickness, we need to know that there is someone who loves us, cares for us, understands us, and will give us another chance. When days grow dark and nights grow dreary, we can be thankful that our God combines in his nature a creative synthesis of love and justice which will lead us through life's dark valleys and into sunlit pathways of hope and fulfillment.” (*The Strength to Love: Chapter 1*)

And what could we possibly do with all this love that seems to be cycling around from the promise of God? We must go out and share it, but not in a nominal Facebook kind of sharing. God didn't add us to his online profile and “like” a few of our posts. No, He sent his Son into our midst, to suffer our pains, to celebrate our joys, and to love us unconditionally. So too must we be reborn as the children of God and continue to show His love unto the world if we trust in His promises. There is no shortage of people who need to see the love of Christ in this world. We must come out of the darkness and live out the love that our Savior has promised us.