



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Lent 2 (A)

March 5, 2023

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

Genesis 12:1-4a

Our first reading begins abruptly with a command spoken by the Lord to Abram: “Go.” Given our usual experience with contemporary narratives, we might expect such an important command to be preceded by a richly textured biographical and psychological context, detailing the rich personalities of Abram, Sarai, and this command-giving Lord. However, Genesis 11 provides few details other than genealogy, and Abram’s response is reported without fanfare: “So Abram went.”

This passage and its lack of detail express the strangeness of God’s action in electing — choosing — particular human beings for God’s purposes. Though divine election might seem to us like a kind of arbitrary blessing on God’s class pet at the expense of everyone else, here we see that God’s choosing of particular persons is always meant to have universal significance beyond the individual. Yes, Abram will be blessed by God’s choice, but this blessing will always be intended for others — “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” In the Divine plan, care for the particular and the universal seem not to be opposed, but even joined!

- Why do you think the story of Abram’s calling was written with such sparse detail?
- Can you think of a current political conflict where local and collective interests are often seen as competitive? How might the story of Abram being blessed to be a blessing change how we normally see things?

Psalm 121

Though our other reading from the Old Testament might have been a bit lacking in subjective experience, here — as in so much of the psalter — there is no lack of emotion or individuality. Perhaps we might pair these texts together – I can certainly imagine Abram and Sarai praying similar words as they set out on their journey!

The psalmist begins by gesturing to the hills on the horizon in hope for some kind of assistance — will help come from these? The psalmist answers their own question: it is the one who made these hills and all heaven and earth — even the Lord — who provides help to their cries. God is beyond the created hills, but not beyond caring for the created hills and those who dwell in and beneath them.

While the radical otherness of divine knowledge and power can often be experienced as a kind of fear-inducing tyranny that destroys human agency and privacy, here, the psalmist then goes on to relay their experience of God’s constant presence as deeply comforting. God’s watch protects both the individual psalmist and all Israel together — again as in our previous lesson, God’s care for the individual and collective is united here!

- Psalm 121 is listed as one of the options for the psalm in the Episcopal burial office. How might this context affect how you understand this psalm?

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

In our epistle, we return with Saint Paul to the story of Abraham (don't worry — he's the same Abram as before, only now with a divinely-added syllable as reported in Genesis 17). It's difficult to hear these words without the polemics of the Reformation ringing in our ears, but it's worth attempting to hear this teaching from our brother Paul with fresh ears.

Let's look at verse 4: "Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due." This pairing of gift and wage is an antithesis that is less common than the New Testament's favorite duo — faith and works — but here Saint Paul seems to be drawing a comparison. If Abraham had been justified by his works rather than by faith, it would be as if he were a kind, diligent, wage-earning employee. Saint Paul's insistence that the justification of a human occurs only by faith, then, preserves a vision of God as a lavish gift-giver, rather than a penny-pinching boss. I don't know about you, but I've had enough bosses in this life to not want another one for eternity — and I find the former image to keep much closer to what I read in Scripture of the God of Israel, who lovingly chooses in freedom to be *for* humanity.

- In light of this passage, what do you think Saint Paul might say to someone who feels like they haven't done enough to deserve God's love?

John 3:1-17

In a gospel like John's where Jesus is constantly speaking in such rich symbolism about eating bodies and drinking blood, Nicodemus' confusion about hearing about some kind of birth from above might resonate with us readers of this text. I'd go even further — it seems to me that Nicodemus' "How can these things be?" is a question that John intentionally wants to provoke in his readers, and I think we have a good deal to learn from our friend Nicodemus here.

For those of us on the other side of the developed sacramental system of the Church, we might think Jesus' teachings here are quite straightforward. "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above" — we might be tempted to respond, "Silly Nicodemus, that's Holy Baptism!" Yet, I think Nicodemus' confusion is instructive here — do we really understand the wonders of our baptismal rebirth without responding with frank astonishment? For all our rote familiarity with the rituals of the church, we might remember Nicodemus' awe at the next baptism we witness or Lord's Supper we celebrate — "How can this be?" is certainly an appropriate reaction to these mysteries by which we catch a glimpse of the kingdom of God.

- What in the gospels or in your own life has made you ask God, "How can this be?"
- Despite it being one of the best-known verses in the Bible, it might be strange to see John 3:16 in its full context here. Does reading it with this surrounding narrative change how you think about it?

Maxine King is a lay Anglican student of theology at Virginia Theological Seminary. She was drawn to The Episcopal Church through encountering Jesus in the Daily Office, and has since become passionate about lay theological education and ministry in the church.