

March 5, 2023

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Texts: Genesis 12: 1-4, Romans 4: 1-5, John 3: 1-17

In the name of God, Amma/Imma, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Abraham and Sarah are called to an unknown destiny. Leave your country behind. Leave your family and go to a destination unknown. This text we heard from Genesis is the opening text that all Catechumens have used over the years—actually, for centuries. This is where the faith begins. *‘I’m taking you, leading you to a place whose destination is unknown. You won’t be the same person when you get there.’* This journey is everything. Faith is a journey whose outcome is unknown.

How many journeys we are able to traverse these days! It seems like there was a time--maybe it was back in the 70s--when we thought we knew just about everything. *“Yep, got all the geography covered. What else is there?”* Well, there are the oceans to begin with. Turns out, we know virtually nothing, and the subatomic realm, and the cosmos, and consciousness itself. How is it that we can think what we think and know that we think we know what we think. Wow! And yet, we go around making those decisions every day, don't we? How did we get here? And then, of course, there's God, that deepest truth of ourselves, and the universe, still seemingly in so many ways undiscovered.

I am using the word 'journey' a bit less these days. Nothing wrong with it, except that it tends to imply that we have to get somewhere else. *‘Yeah, you’re just, you’re so close. But you’re not good enough yet. Just remember that part. You’ll be fine.’* Whew, so disparaging of the soul in the person. *‘You’re right. Just not there.’* Rather, friends, as the mystics remind us, we are already in the presence of God. What's absent is our awareness of it. That has to be nourished and cultivated.

We live in what has been called a 'merit badge society'. If you're good, you get good things. If you work hard, you get what you deserve. If you don't, you didn't earn it. And it's hard to think of life any other way. It's the way we've been formed--since grade school.

Grace seems like another world. Nobody walks around saying, *‘God has to see me, right?’* Now, on the inside we’re feeling, *‘I’ve got to improve. I’ve got to be better. I’ve got to put something on here.’* God does see me, but nobody says that out loud--*‘I’m going to be a spiritual success. Anybody else with me? Why not?’*
‘Why even talk that way? That’s not the way this works!’

And our very notions of God keep us in that boxed-in mode: God, the Enforcer; God, the Equalizer. Do you really want to meet Jesus in a back alley? Why is that scary? But that's the religious formation so many of us have gotten in this Western model.

All spiritual disciplines have one purpose--to get rid of our illusions, so that we can be present, so that we can see who we are, and what we're about, and what's happening. It's utterly essential, because the mass culture of our current society invites us to live in a trance, at best. Every time you have that notion of, 'I'm ready to give up', that's the illusion succeeding. It's wearing down our souls. 'How much more of this can I take? Why was I born? Why is life like this? What's the point--even if I change, so what?' That's the illusion--pressing, pushing, squashing.

Grace is a way of living in the presence of God; it's a way of living in the awareness of the presence of God and, God willing, it's a way of enjoying God's presence. And every time I say that, we all say, 'That's too much--to enjoy this life, God's presence—let's tamp that one down a little bit.' That's that discouraging voice already at the invitation to the best of who we are, because God is nothing but delighted in each one of you. Taking that to heart, that's what faith is about. Talk about an unknown journey, right? Where's that going to lead-- if God's delighting me, and if I began to delight in myself, and delight in the people around me, life might become beautiful! But it takes some practice to break through the illusions.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus under the cloak of darkness. (It's like he was a member of Peace Lutheran.) 'Is there any validity in all of this stuff? What are you teaching?'

Jesus says, *"You can't cope with the light, it's just the light. You get so used to the darkness, that you don't know what the light is."* 'Turn that off. It's hurting me.' Jesus says, *'What you need is a higher life--you need to be birthed from above or birthed from within--it's a whole transformation.'*

You know, people talk about 'born again', that's become a kind of formula-product thing. That's not what we're talking about. Usually that's one-time, and if people keep referencing that, that's not what the text says. Jesus talked about being birthed from above, within, beyond—again, and again, and again, and again....

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That's why we worship on a weekly basis--to nourish that starting from the beginning again. *"In truth. I tell you,"* Jesus says, *"unless a person is born of water and the Spirit, you can't enter God's reign. What flesh produces is flesh; what the Spirit produces is spirit. So don't be astounded at my word that you must have a higher birth. The spirit is a wind blowing where it will, and what the Spirit is saying you hear, not knowing where it came from, or where it's going."* [John 3: 5-8] This is the state of one who's brought forth in the spirit.

Can you imagine if we as Church understood our lives and community to be 'wind listeners'? This last week it's roaring through some of our homes--and it is gentle breeze. Pay attention to the movement of that Spirit. We don't know where it came from, where it's going. It's permeating

us--wind listeners. It could take us out of some of the stagnation of what we call 'institutional Church', wouldn't it? *'Oh yeah. Those are the people who are listening to the wind.'* Is that us?

'How can this be?' asks Nicodemus. Jesus responds in classic Hebrew--poetic patterns of pairs and triplets. You know the Johannine School--as it's called--the disciples of the disciple John, meditated upon these words, these Scriptures. They sat there absorbing them at the deepest possible level to understand what this means, because Jesus is speaking about Reality, not the Christian religion. He's speaking to us in deepest levels of our heart and being--trying to reveal this truth of who we are, and whose we are. They were absorbing these texts.

This is not what we call--do you know your Bible? *'James 6:12, who knows it? Come on.'* (That's why God made the Internet. You can cheat now on your phones.) That's not it, people. It's absorbing this word of Life. The language is so simple., almost childlike, and yet, so rich in its simplicity.

Jesus says, *'We say what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, and you cannot cope with the light of our witness. If you do not believe when I tell you things of earth, how will you believe when I tell you of the things of heaven? No one has climbed up into the heavens, except the One who has come down from the heavens, the Bar Enasha, the New Humanity, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up that all who put their trust in him may have in him a life that never ends.'* [John 3: 11-13]

You may recall that one period in the desert-trekking of the Hebrew people, poisonous snakes were sent out, biting, and killing the people. They begged for mercy. Moses set up a stand with a bronze serpent on it, and those who looked at the serpent were healed, and they lived, looking at an image of the very thing that's killing them. [Numbers 21: 6-9] *So, the Son of Man must be lifted up. For God so loved the world that God gave over the Son, the only begotten, so that those putting trust in him should not perish, but may have a life that never ends. For God did not dispatch the Son into the world in order to condemn the world, but that the world should be rescued by him.* [John 3: 14-17]

Grace is never neutral or static. It is the energy by which the blind see, and the dead come to new life. Today, we understand that the light of Christ, that dying and rising compassion, is not just for individual salvation. It is the transformation of persons, and this world, which God has loved into being.

Genuine mystical practice is leading us to the awareness of God. It is not 'positive thinking', or 'positivity' in a world which is overrun by economic and ecological disasters--and pretending, 'Well, someday we get to escape.'

No, God so loved this world that that loving transformation and healing power has been brought into our lives and community, to engage--not avoid--the context of our lives.

Can we see it? Well, this meal [pointing to the altar] keeps opening our eyes--and birthing us from above. Amen.

The peace, which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.