

GRACE EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Sheboygan, Wisconsin

The Second Sunday in Lent (A)

Genesis 12.1-4a

Psalm 121

Romans 4.1-5, 13-17

John 3.1-17

The lessons this week combine the theme of faith and rebirth in the Spirit. Our salvation is not “merited,” but flows from the free gift of God’s grace.

Genesis 12.1-4a

1. This reading begins the story of Abraham’s call and journey. The LORD calls him to leave his native land, and Abraham obeys.
 - a. God promises Abraham progeny, and that by him all nations will be blessed.
2. The LORD recites the blessings which flow to Abraham. In Hebrew there are seven. In English the number is less clear:
 - a. Abraham is to be a great nation.
 - i. Blessed by God.
 - b. Abraham’s name is to be great.
 - i. So that he will be a blessing.
 - c. God will bless those who bless Abraham.
 - i. Those who curse Abraham will be cursed.
 - d. All peoples will be blessed in Abraham.
3. “So Abraham went ...” Abraham has faith in the promises of the LORD.

Psalm 121

1. A psalm of confidence. The change from first person to second person suggests to some a dialogue between a worshipper and a priest, the priest then pronouncing a blessing. (Cf. Num. 6.24-26 for a blessing on a pilgrim.)
2. “My help” (v.2) may be compared with Pss. 124.8 and 146.5-6. Help is equated with salvation. The psalm is used in the western monastic rite in the Office for the Dead.

Romans 4.1-5, 13-17

1. Paul develops his theme that through the Gospel the righteousness of God is revealed as justifying those who have faith in Him.
 - a. We are justified by grace through faith.
 - i. This confirms the Law.
2. Paul uses Abraham as an example that justification by faith was operative already in the Old Testament times.
 - a. Abraham was reckoned as righteous because of his faith.
3. Paul argues that the Law and faith (in God’s grace) cannot exist side-by-side, the Law must yield.

- a. The one who lives by faith lives by grace.
- 4. The promise holds good not only for the Jew but for all who live by faith in God.
- 5. Romans 4.1–8 offers a clear and settled antithesis between “works” and “faith”. Paul does not here refer to “works of the law,” just “works.” There is no hint that Jewish privilege is at all the issue.
 - a. “Works” are a category, though inclusive of “works of the law,” now *larger* than that and more *general* (cf. 4.6; 9.32; 11.6). Paul is not speaking about “good works” done by Abraham, but about faithful obedience to what God requires.
- 6. Justification is of the “ungodly” (not that Paul assumes they stay that way!), *i.e.*, those without claim on God by means of their own righteousness.
 - a. Justification is defined via Genesis 15.6 as the “reckoning of faith as righteousness apart from works” (4.5, 6).
 - i. Justification, or this status of righteousness, is described in terms of the *forgiveness of sin* via Ps. 31.1–2. It is secured not only by Christ’s death but also his resurrection (4.23–25).
 - ii. Paul’s logic requires a strongly “in Christ” conception of salvation; both Christ’s death and resurrection are participated in by means of union with Christ’s judgment and His vindication.

John 3.1-17

- 1. Nicodemus is a sympathetic but “unbelieving” Jewish leader. When Jesus begins His teaching (at v. 3), He begins “Very truly ...”
- 2. This formula, also often translated as “Verily” or “Truly, truly” is literally “Amen, amen”.
 - a. This formula is used by Jesus for Christological affirmations (5.19; 8.58; 10.7) and formal judgments about Jesus’ protagonists (as in this passage at v. 11).
 - b. This formula is also used in describing conditions of salvation, experiences of future salvation, and in making predictions.
 - c. In other words, when Jesus says “Amen, amen ...” it is very much time to pay attention!
- 3. John contrasts Nicodemus saying “we know” in v. 2 and Jesus saying this in v. 11. John is contrasting how a Jewish leader and teacher will not accept the testimony of Jesus with Jesus speaking with authority.
 - a. Jesus proceeds to teach about the purpose of the coming of the Son, and about birth in the Spirit.
- 4. John includes an eschatology (teaching about the end of time) in which salvation is realized. Those who believe have eternal life.
 - a. Belief is in the Son. Here, as in the prologue (1.16, 18) the Son is referred to as God’s “only” Son.
 - i. In Greek the term is *monogenēs* (only-begotten).
 - b. God is understood to be “giving” His Son in the death of His Son (cf. Gal. 1.4; 2.20; Rom. 8.32).