

Sermon for Holy Trinity Geneva on Sunday 1 March 2026, the Second Sunday of Lent

Texts: Genesis 12.1-4a; Romans 4.1-5, 13-17; John 3.1-17

Born of the Spirit

We tend to see our lives as linear, that is, moving in a one-way direction between birth and death. In many ways this isn't surprising – after all, we're born, we grow up, pass our teenage years into adulthood, raise our own families and progress into our senior years. It's a familiar pattern which we can see and grasp, though at times it can feel hard and relentless, particularly in our latter years.

But what if that wasn't the only way in which we are called into life? What if there was a completely different dimension to life beyond that which we experience in our normal physical lives? Would we grasp this with hope and joy or see it as deeply threatening to our predictable human life journey?

These are the radical questions which challenge both the protagonists in our Old Testament and Gospel readings today and challenge us too at a very profound level. For they force us to think about the meaning and purpose of our lives and indeed, to consider what life, that is, living fully and with integrity as a human being, is all about.

Let's look at these questions first within the context of our Bible readings today. In the disarmingly short and simple Old Testament reading, God calls Abram and his wife Sarai, to leave Haran where they are living, and set off to another land.

It's disarming for three reasons. First of all, this call comes out of the blue. Abram and Sarai are settled, they are in the later years of their life, they have perhaps come to terms with the fact they are childless and they are surrounded by family and all that is familiar to them. Second, it is a call to leave all this, at the age when they might quite reasonably have expected to end their days in Haran. And thirdly they are being called to set off into the unknown, in response to the call of God whom they barely know, with the promise that he will lead them into a new land and that they, despite their old age, will become the father and mother of a great nation.

It's a huge ask of them and yet astonishingly, Abram and Sarai obey this call and set out. We're going to return to them in a moment but first of all, I'd look to look at our next protagonist in the Bible passages of today, Nicodemus.

Nicodemus shares some parallels with Abram and Sarai. He is of mature years, though probably not as old as them, a respected Pharisee and religious leader, one who is well-established and admired within the Jewish community. One imagines that he had everything going for him in that role.

Yet something has unsettled him. He has met Jesus, heard his teaching and no doubt, heard a good deal more through members of his community of the healing, miracles and teaching of Jesus. He can't square it up in his mind and is worried that if he engages too closely with Jesus in public, his role and authority within his community may be compromised. But something has stirred within him, raising deep

questions, so he compromises – coming to Jesus in the depths of night so that he can talk to him without being seen. Perhaps he is trying to find a middle way – affirming Jesus as a great religious leader without rocking the religious establishment of which he is such a core part

Yet what Jesus says to him is something for which he is utterly unprepared and which takes the wind out of his sails. For Jesus speaks to him of the need to be reborn of the Holy Spirit. The only way to enter the Kingdom of God is to be born of water and of the Spirit. Jesus guides Nicodemus to glimpse that it is through him, the Son of Man who will be lifted on the Cross to save humankind, that he will find the way to be born into eternal life.

What does it mean to be born of the Spirit? As both Abram and Sarai and Nicodemus were to discover, this is essentially about coming into a living relationship with God which involves entering into life in an entirely new way. This process of new birth is both a call from God and also our active consent in saying “yes” to that call. And for Nicodemus and all who met Jesus during his earthly ministry or have experienced God’s call since then, the path to new birth lies us putting our faith in him, the Son of God who makes God known to us.

Being born of the Spirit involves us in a dual process which is both, paradoxically, utterly secure, and at the same time, completely unsettling of all we thought was assured and settled. It is utterly secure because in saying “yes” to God through Christ, we are putting ourselves into the hands of the one who is our Creator, who loves us to the very depths of our being, who showed that love in dying for us and in whom we find ultimate meaning and purpose in life.

But it is completely unsettling, because, as Jesus told Nicodemus, the Spirit moves freely and none can tell where it comes from or where it goes. By putting ourselves into the hands of God, we are being asked to let go of the security, the predictability, the assuredness of our normal, linear lives and instead, be willing to go where God calls us and to follow where Jesus goes ahead. And as Abram and Sarai and Nicodemus were to discover, the Spirit of God would lead them into unexpected, challenging and often risky situations in which they would learn to find and trust God as they moved are out of their comfort zone.

It’s also a messy business because learning to live as children of God born of the Spirit, involves putting our trust in God and following even when that trust is tested to the limit. Abram and Sarai fail many times in that trust and have to be rescued by God on various occasions until they come to the point where they see God’s covenant promise of them fulfilled. We don’t hear of Nicodemus again until towards the end of St John’s Gospel and I imagine that he too had a challenging journey of faith trying first to internalise and then live out what Jesus had said to him.

Being born of the Spirit isn’t just something which happened to Abram, Sarai and Nicodemus and other people in the Bible whose lives were touched by God. It is a reality to which everyone of us is invited by God to enter into **now**. We mark the start of this spiritually through the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation. But God calls

us to grow in our new life, to allow that new life of the Spirit which he offers us to take root in us by putting ourselves daily into the hands of God and following Him.

Over the past few weeks, I have been privileged to journey with our teenage and adult candidates as they have prepared for their Confirmation and in some cases, for their Baptism as well. In each case, it has been deeply moving to see how the Holy Spirit is at work in their lives, calling them to a relationship of faith in God and often challenging them to review their lives and lifestyles in response to that call. At the Confirmation service this evening, we are going to hear personal testimonies from some of the candidates of how they have heard and responded to the prompting of the Holy Spirit in the decision they have taken to be confirmed.

Entering into this relationship with God as we are born again through his Holy Spirit, is life-changing. Abram and Sarai enter into a covenant relationship with God, that is, a relationship of absolute commitment, and in the process gain new names and identities, becoming Abraham (meaning 'father of many nations') and Sarah (princess or mother of many nations). They also witness the first part of God's promise to them coming to fulfilment, with the birth of their son, Isaac in their latter years.

We encounter Nicodemus once more in John's Gospel immediately after the death of Jesus, when, with great courage, he comes openly to prepare his body for burial by anointing him with oil and spices. He is moving from darkness to light as the new life of the Spirit is calling him to witness to Jesus.

So this Lent, as we journey with Jesus in the wilderness, seeking to cut through the physical and spiritual clutter that encumbers our lives, let's pray that God will open our hearts instead to the call of the Holy Spirit. May we, like Abram, Sarai and Nicodemus embrace the new life which the Spirit offers us, inviting us daily into a growing, dynamic relationship with God. And may we too, in the power of that Spirit, offer ourselves to God as a living sacrifice, trusting that where God leads us is where we find our true freedom and that living water which wells up in us to eternal life.

Amen

Canon Daphne Green