

"Born and Bred for Love" (12Mar17)

John3:1-17;

Romans4:1-5,13-17;

Genesis12:1-4a

There's so much in these readings that I thought of just opening it up by asking, "So what do you want to talk about?" Why did Nicodemus come and Jesus respond obtusely? There's being born again and the Spirit blowing, the odd serpent in the wilderness reference and Abram with issues of blessing and historical geography, the protective Psalm and the immensely dense but immensely vital stuff from Romans, which in its regular version describes being reckoned as sin vs. reckoned to you as righteous justification. There is so much, so many ways we could go.

Instead let's sing a Kids' song. Stand up so you can join in the actions: *Father Abraham had many sons, and many sons had Father Abraham. I am one of them, and so are you, so let's all praise the Lord: (with a right, and a left, right leg, left leg, and the tongue, turn around).** Okay, you can sit back down. In the full version, each action accumulates verse by verse, but the *whole* sermon time with this Kids' song.

When I was younger and first sang it at camps and retreats, I thought it was about Abraham Lincoln. I hadn't heard of him having lots of children, so I figured maybe it meant freeing slaves, which also helped break down the too often rigidly racial categories implicit in genetic parent\child relationships. I also realized as a young person that the song was deficient in saying he had many sons but leaving out daughters, so I figured it could be fixed a bit with he "had many Kids."

Those expansions to the song are necessary, since the broad vision from our Bible readings today has Abraham as the ancestor of many, father of nations, whose descendants are more numerous than the stars overhead, in whom all

families of the earth will be blessed. Meaning: a lot.

Our Genesis reading is the start of this saga. Even while clinging to this promise from God, Abraham will ponder how in the world he could become the ancestor of many when he and his wife Sarah have no offspring at all. He'll sleep with Sarah's servant as part of their conniving toward the promise. He'll hand Sarah off to sleep with Kings (a big risk for the certainty of his bloodline and exactly contradicting a chauvinistic purpose of the Bible's laws against adultery). When Abraham is 100 years old and considers his flesh as good as dead, and Sarah is laughing incredulously, then they'll have a son. And then a pair of warped grandsons, one a trickster and the other a buffoon. Then the dozen great-grandsons, each with various idiosyncratic scandals, leading on through the grumbling of 12 tribes of Israel, and the struggles of identity getting passed down through the generations.

Originally these identifications are about being born into the group—family, tribe, nation. And we should be honest: such delineations of our lineage are intentionally exclusive in drawing borders. We first think of connections to whom we're related, our relatives, of shared DNA, like how for her birthday my grandma is getting a gift on Ancestry.com to trace her (and my) family roots back to Ireland, Scotland, Germany and who knows what else. We expect ethnic origins have ongoing impact and stereotypes, that I'd have trademark Scottish thriftiness and like beer and that I'm skeptical of you Scandinavians. We draw these persisting identities, even as we sketch new boundaries to say I'm an American and I'm a Wisconsinite and I'm a Lutheran and I'm a Minnesota Twins fan and I'm a guy with a beard and these are my people.

* sort of like this <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7DiBZmz8CDE>

Now, you might notice a couple of those involve self-selecting in or out. They aren't the same kind of familial or tribal or ethnic or national identities, but are groups with more permeable boundaries. The offspring of Abraham and Sarah and getting tied into their family must be more than that kind of merry mob. It can't be just genetics. There must be room for adoption into this heritage, otherwise it wouldn't be nearly so broad and most of us wouldn't have a chance. If it were classified as a Jewish lineage or, more precisely, a Canaanite\ Palestinian\ Mediterranean\ Middle Eastern background, most of us would be excluded. From the start, they had to find ways to incorporate others, accommodate refugees, to "naturalize" the aliens (to use parallel terms still fraught with conundrums). So they extended status through distinguishing physical marks and by sharing peculiar practices. The men were circumcised, the defining characteristic of being an Abrahamic insider. They observed the sabbath and didn't eat pork, a couple more distinctive traits.

The church pressed further, arguing that circumcision couldn't serve as the brand, nor could it be flagged by national boundaries or religious practice. This needed to be a bigger group, explicitly available to foreigners, outsiders, those unlike "us," and also very specifically in the early church that women needed to be able to be more centrally definitive. So most every old way of basing it—on patriarchal connections or genetic similarity or any physical characteristic—was gone. That stuff couldn't count anymore as the basis for God's family.

Yet it's fascinating that the Romans reading emphatically connects us to Abraham and Sarah as "ancestors according to the flesh." It doesn't say spirit over flesh, but boldly recollects carnal connections. We can't move it to some imagined

higher purpose or purer potential. Indeed, even as it proclaims one big happy family, it rules out any sense of claiming especially pious qualities. It knows our usual motives are for reward, for payment, for what we earn or get out of the deal. It recognizes imperfections and family squabbles in saying the ungodly are included, as well.

In that, it deals with the difficult family conundrum of the will and inheritance, of who gets what and why. Yet rather than qualifications claiming "I should get more because he liked me best, I was the most responsible in caring for him, I'm most like him," this chooses to spread the inheritance to all. It's discouraging this is such a hard reading to muddle through (as legal documents tend to be) since at its core it's plain astonishing. This language of a last will and testament is of God's bequest to Abraham, and how that also is handed down to you, you who had no reason to be adopted into the family of that promise, who weren't connected to the tribe, who didn't bear the ethnic identity, who may not have even bothered to follow the rules or live up to the standards. So much for the northern European Protestant work ethic.

As God's will and new testament is read, Holden Evening Prayer phrases it, "O Faithful One, you promised to Sarah and Abraham Kindness forevermore." The Word of promise became flesh in them, and it carries down to you. And no amount of legal bickering could dislodge you from your guaranteed inheritance. With Romans' play on words, it isn't based on your belief or trust, but that you've been written into God's Charitable Trust. Quite simply, you and this enormous family of yours have been blessed with God's goodness and entrusted with the earth itself, without so much as a wagging finger not to squander it. (Though we might notice amid our adoption as God's

children a couple chapters later on confiding that creation groans with eager longing for us actually to act like the children we're revealed to be becoming.)

That moves us from language of death to birth and new life. For that we turn to the conversation portrayed in the Gospel. Nicodemus' confusion has continued to cascade through the generations and made people think that spiritual rebirth disassociates us from these bodies. Yet when Jesus talks about the Spirit and about heavenly things, he isn't pointing elsewhere, separated from the reality we know. Think with Jesus' prayer, "your will be done on earth as in heaven:" this is about God's way, God's intents and purposes and about spreading them here and now. Jesus is striving to connect Nicodemus and all of us into that life. He wants it so dearly he moves deeper and more intimately than the language of adoption or inheritance and calls it a new birth. He declares that you are born not just into Abraham and Sarah's family of promise and trust but into God's own family. Simultaneously countering centuries of too much masculinity, these are delightfully rich images of a mother God, who carries you in her womb, who labors to bring you to life, who nurses and nurtures you in love.

This mothering God so loved the world that she gave her firstborn Son, the Son who was born into human flesh and had a human mother as well as this compassionate heavenly Mother, a Son who became flesh and dwelt among us— who, to bring the heaven-ish purposes to life among us, was sustained by an umbilical cord, entered this world through a birth canal, and nursed on breast milk, at the same time (again, in intimate maternal language from John 1:18) that he was held close to the bosom of God and was a Mama's boy to the end. That is what Jesus is bringing to birth in you, as well. You are born of God and, in that, share the eternal

life. In your flesh is the genetics of God. You are born and bred with the love of God, the blessing that extends beyond the confines of family, tribe, and nation to all the world and all creation.