

Lent 2, Year A
February 17, 2008

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

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At our baptism, and at the renewal of our baptism vows, we are asked this question: “Will you proclaim, by word and example, the Good News of God in Christ?” Will you show the world, by what you say and by the way you live, what Jesus taught as recorded in the gospels? Will you let his good news shine through your life?

It’s not a small question. It implies knowing what Jesus teaches in the gospels first, and then living it out for all the world to see. Another promise that requires the answer, “I will, with God’s help” because we cannot do something so difficult on our own.

I have a book whose thesis is summarized nicely by its title. It’s called *Ideas have Consequences*. What we do, the way we behave, is a consequence of the ideas we hold to be true. When we act, we make our choices based on these deeply held convictions.

If we are convinced, for example, that life has no meaning, that being alive is a cruel joke, we might make reckless, dangerous choices, not caring whether we live or die.

If, on the other hand, we value life and are deeply convinced that God created us out of love for us, the choices we make will be more positive ones, aimed at improving our lives, coming closer to who God wants us to be.

This is a pretty simplistic illustration. Most of our ideas probably place us somewhere between these two extremes. But the thesis of the book holds up. Those things we believe in do determine how we act. Ideas have consequences.

So what is the idea we need to hold, the truth we trust and hold dear, that would cause us to answer this question in the affirmative? “Will you proclaim, by word and example, the Good News of God in Christ?” What, in other words, is the conviction we must hold that drives us to tell and show the world that we know God because of Jesus Christ?

The stage is crowded with characters this morning, gathered to give us their answers. First, there’s Abram. Not yet named by God “Abraham,” which means “father of a multitude.” Not yet.

God calls him to move. No reasons given, just a call to leave home with his family and animals and his whole entourage, and follow where God leads. In return God promises blessings. And a great nation. And Abram offers no objections, requires no explanations, makes no complaints. He just goes. What, do you imagine, was the deeply held conviction that made Abram trust this call and willingly follow God from all that he knew, into the vast unknown?

Paul, the next character on the stage, reminds us that this action of Abraham's was reckoned to him as righteousness. God marked it down on Abraham's tally sheet on the credit side. God considered this a demonstration of Abraham's faith. Ah, there's the magic word. It was faith – faith in God that was at the center of Abraham's heart, his deeply held conviction.

Paul spent his whole life proclaiming by word and example the Good News of God in Christ. It became his life's work when Jesus claimed him on the Road to Damascus. He turned around in the middle of his road, too, and went in the other direction because Jesus called.

Paul holds up the example of Abraham to the Church at Rome in the portion of his letter we read this morning, saying it's not because Abraham followed the law that God promised him a nation, but because of his faith, and that faith may be shared by Abraham's descendants, those to whom Paul is talking, and indeed by us, who worship here this morning.

We switch scenes now and characters. Enter Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, a Pharisee. Under cover of darkness he comes to tell Jesus he has noticed him and his work, and to give his stamp of approval. He doesn't ask Jesus to do anything for him and he doesn't express a desire to follow him. He might be there out of curiosity more than anything else.

And we know, because of the symbolism so common to the gospel of John, that because he comes in the dark he will not be able to see the light. Jesus' response to him confuses him because he can't understand the realm of the Spirit. Nicodemus is earth-bound and logical. He is a follower of the law. He looks for proofs. He's not yet one of faith, though that may come later. For now he has no idea what Jesus means when he likens the Spirit to wind that blows where it chooses.

His deepest held convictions do not enable him to grasp the idea of being born of the Spirit. The consequence for Nicodemus is disappointment. He doesn't get it. What do you suppose would be his response to the questions "Will you proclaim, by word and example, the Good News of God in Christ?"

No one can make this promise without first having faith in God. We don't have to be fully there, we may never be fully there, but we need to be willing to accept God's help in getting there.

I've just spent from Friday morning to Saturday noon at Cedar Hills with 10 of the seminarians our Diocese is sponsoring in the process that leads to priesthood. They are at various stages in the three-year process of earning the Master of Divinity degree at different seminaries.

We talked, worshiped, ate, and played together, and the Commission on Ministry members interviewed individually those who wish to move to the next step in the process, being a Candidate for Holy Orders.

It was my first such conference and my first chance to meet these young people, most of whom are in their 20s and early 30s. I want to tell you there is great hope for the Episcopal Church. These people have wonderful gifts for ministry and are growing in knowledge and in faith.

Many of them picked up and moved, like Abraham, with family and entourage, in order to attend seminary. Some have run into obstacles, all have discovered more about themselves, their strengths and shortcomings, all have worked very hard, no one is throwing in the towel.

I feel privileged to know them and to be able to offer myself for support and encouragement.

We talked about the movement of the Spirit. “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going.”

It’s not an easy thing to put ourselves – all of us, now, not just those preparing for priesthood – into the hands of the Spirit. We lose control when we do that. But if we hold deeply the idea that it’s the God who loves us who is in control of our lives, then the consequence of that idea may easily be a strong, affirmative answer to the questions, “Will you proclaim, by word and example, the Good News of God in Christ?”

Trust God. Expect the Spirit to call us into new places. Have faith that the wind of the Spirit will blow us all someplace good.

Thanks be to God.

Soli Deo Gloria