

Worship Service “Reformation”

Lent 2, Year A, 5th March, 2023

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17 NIV / John 3:1-17 NSRV

Prelude

Opening Music [Lord of the Dance](#) written by Sydney Carter,

tune was adapted from the Shaker melody "Simple Gifts", attributed to Elder Joseph Brackett, performed by Barley Bree and posted to YouTube by Chet Valley Churches, CCLI song number 75829, used and reported under CCLI Streaming License 20261246

Welcome Guests / Announcements

Pass the Peace

Opening Music *To God Be the Glory* 102

Call to Worship

One: Jesus, we know you are from God, so tell us what to do

All: **“Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”**

One: That’s impossible! No, tell us what we need to do.

All: **“Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and of Spirit.”**

One: We don’t get it, Jesus, just speak to us plainly!

All: **Get your head off of the ground and look above. Don’t see what is right in front of you, but what is ahead of you.**

One: How can we do this?

All: **Go back to the beginning. Go back to when the Spirit, the Wind of God, swept over the waters. See everything through God’s vision, and live into God’s intention.**

One: For God so loved the world

All: **That indeed, God did not send his Son to condemn the World, but in order that the world might be saved through him.**

Invocation

Ancient of Days, call us back to the beginning. Help us to wipe the slate clean and start fresh. Call us into the ways of the Spirit that move across the waters of birth, to give new life, abundant life. Help us to do our part to reform our thinking to see not the mess that is around us at our feet, but the opportunity to lift our gaze, to live into Your vision of new, eternal life, through Christ Jesus. Amen.

Epistle Reading Romans 4:1-5, 13-17 NIV

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter?

If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God.

What does Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation.

However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.

It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith.

For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless,

because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.

Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.

As it is written: “I have made you a father of many nations.” He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.

A Time of Prayer

Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer

God of Abram and Nicodemus, God of all of us who think we are too old or too poor or too small or too weak or too busy, God of all of us daunted by the sheer wonder of the plan you lay out before us: we come to you now, aware of all you have done for us, and yet still struggling with our doubts. Birth us all anew, O God;

God of Abram and Nicodemus, we pray for this world where so many wander homeless not by choice, but out of necessity, where so many are looking for milk and honey or a great Name to rescue them. We pray for all the people in this world,

especially . . . We pray for the women and men who lay down their lives for the safety of brothers and sisters and neighbors . . . We pray for those who lead us . . . Birth us all anew, O God; God of Abram and Nicodemus, we pray for all those who long for a new beginning:

those who are imprisoned, those who are estranged, those who have left loved ones behind, and those who are ill or infirm, especially . . . Give them all new life by the power of your Spirit. Help us to see how we can be present with them as your hands and feet. Birth us all anew, O God;

God of Abram and Nicodemus, we pray for your holy Church . . . Give us the courage to leave everything behind and follow you. Give us the faith to act on what we do not understand. Bless us to be a blessing to everyone in your Name.

Birth us all anew, O God. Hear us and help us on our journey. Help us to grow up again, to accept not only earthly things but heavenly things, to lift up your Son and be lifted up ourselves, to let your Spirit move us beyond our understanding. God of Abram and Nicodemus and all of us, hear us and help us even as surely as the Spirit blows among us, all for the sake of your dear Son, who taught us when we pray to say:

Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, On earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread, And forgive us our trespasses,

As we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,

Forever and ever, Amen.

Hymn *There's a Wideness in God's Glory* 145

Gospel Reading: John 3:1-17 NSRV

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.

He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.

What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.

Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above.'

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 goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"

Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony.

If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?"

No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Message - *Reformation*

Change is probably something most of us dread, at some level. While it may bring something fresh, new and exciting, it inevitably entails stepping away from the familiar and comfortable, often into the strange and disconcerting. Our human minds like to know what to expect. At the most primitive level, our brains are wired to avoid the unfamiliar, and work very hard to arrange our reality into comfortable categories and procedures that follow familiar patterns.

There is security in what is familiar. We know what to expect and what is expected, how to act and react, and what is coming next. We understand the routine, and the familiar is

organized in a way that makes sense, and makes sense of our world as we experience it. Yet you've probably heard the expression that the one constant you can count on is change; that and death and taxes. But that does bring up an important point, one that all of us here have experienced. Whether we like it or not, change happens throughout our lives, whether we choose to embrace it or not.

Last week we talked a lot about making choices. Often, instead of choosing to accept change, we often try to resist it, choosing instead to try to keep everything "the same as it has always been." We like our routines, the ways we know. Yet in a world that has change as its constant, we can be sure that it hasn't "always been that way." That's just our perception. Generations before had a different perception of "how it's always been" and generations to come will have another sense of the familiar and routine. And nowhere is this conflict of the familiar versus change felt more keenly than in our journeys of faith.

Both our scriptures lessons this morning are about the conceptions of tradition and the change that challenges those traditional views. In our passage from Romans, Paul addresses that age old perception that is it through the birthright from Abraham, and adherence to the law that followed, that righteousness was obtained. However, there was no law or tradition for Abraham to follow at the beginning. How would he have followed the right path then?

Paul is challenging his congregation's notion of "how it's always been" and reminding them that Abraham is the spiritual father of all nations, not just Israel. Without the law to follow, it wasn't his obedience to scripture or his actions that made him righteous, it was his faith in the providence of God. It was his willingness to step out in faith and accept change, without knowing where that change would take him.

In our second reading this morning we have Nicodemus, who represents quite the contrast from Paul's depiction of Abraham. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, an important one. He was part of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Temple. He was a man of power. Yet that doesn't imply he was a bad man by definition.

Often when we hear the word "Pharisee," our minds often automatically assign a negative connotation to what is being talked about. Certainly, there were Pharisees that were responsible for or involved in the persecution of Jesus and the early church. Paul himself played a role in the stoning of Stephen in Acts. But the individual actions of some of the Pharisees do not necessarily make a statement about the group as a whole. Pharisees, by definition, were men who dedicated their lives to studying and interpreting the Jewish scriptures, seeking to discern the meaning of those scriptures, and how to apply those laws to the daily lives of those who followed that tradition. They were esteemed rabbis who spent their lives in study and debate, following the best scholarly traditions of the time.

As is the case with any group that finds themselves in positions of power and influence, some are corrupted by that authority. But many truly sought knowledge and understanding, and had respectable motives. Some of these, including Nicodemus, took an interest in Jesus

and the message he was teaching. It was something new, a different perspective. They were itching to hear more, to engage in lively debate and perhaps gain new insight. So Nicodemus, as their representative, comes to meet with this itinerant rabbi from Galilee, to find out what his message was about. But part of the allure was the edginess of this new message. It ran counter to the status quo, pushing the boundaries, not just of Judaism, but of the empire under which it lived. Nicodemus was part of that status quo, he was part of the structure that depended on and supported maintaining that empire.

So he came in the dead of night, in the dark, where nobody would see him and question his loyalties. He came seeking information, answers to the questions Jesus had been raising among the Pharisees. Yet this exchange doesn't go as planned. It didn't play out as a scholarly debate about established doctrine and dogma. From Nicodemus' perspective, it went south right from the beginning. Jesus responds to his initial compliment by saying that "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Now those of you who are paying attention may have caught the fact that what I just quoted is different from the scripture we have printed in the bulletin and what I read earlier. Language and translation in this particular passage are important to consider when examining it.

The Greek word used here, *anōthen*, can mean either "again or anew," or "from above." It has certainly been interpreted and translated as "again" most consistently over the centuries, to the point that "born again" has developed a charismatic significance and meaning all its own.

Nicodemus himself goes down this road. He is perplexed because he completely missed the symbolism and point of the metaphor. He's thinking of crawling back into his mother's womb to be born again. It seems ridiculous to him. You're only born once, isn't that enough? Besides, everyone grows up and grows old and dies, that's the way of things. Jesus also says, "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit."

Now, it might have helped Nicodemus if he'd said that first. But still, what does that all mean? Certainly one can draw allusions to baptism from the water imagery, but I think Jesus might mean a bit more than that if we look at what else he had to say. He talks about the wind blowing wherever it pleases, and how unpredictable that wind can be. Said in connection with language about the Spirit and the water recalls the imagery from creation in Genesis 1:2, where "the spirit of God," or a "wind from God" spread "over the face of the waters" and brought creation into being from the empty void of what was. There's a sense of needing to go back to the beginning. But Nicodemus just can't grasp how that could be done. He can't change, or reform his way of understanding, of looking at the world. Even as "a teacher of Israel," he can't understand.

Like us, he sees things as now, as part of a linear way of thinking and keeping track of time. This is how things work, this is how "it's always been." he can't see past the understanding of the here and now; he can't think outside of his box. Jesus is critical of him because he is a

scholar of scripture, yet fails to recognize that God is constantly working outside of the box, turning the world upside down, and reminding us that God's time, Kairos time, is not Chronos, chronological time.

Jesus is telling him that God doesn't work the way the world works, but he still doesn't understand. It's like the people looking down in the wilderness in Exodus and seeing only the troubles in front of them, biting each other like snakes. It wasn't until they lifted up their eyes that they saw God's way, that they didn't have to quarrel and fight and bite and sting one another.

So, too, must the Son of Humanity be lifted up, so we can see above ourselves, above our understanding of the world and time and each other, from the way it's always been and the way we've always done it. Because when we look down, all we see is what is in front of us, the limitations we know, and the death that awaits us all. But when we look up, we see what God has in store for us, the uncharted possibilities in this world and the next.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.... "Indeed, God did not send his Son into the world in order to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Jesus was about saving this world, not condemning it. But if we can't step back from what has always been, if we can't embrace the change that comes, we've already condemned ourselves to just more of the same. We're like the people in the wilderness refusing to listen to Moses and getting bit and stung because we can only see what we have always seen, the way things have always been, instead of lifting our vision to see what God wants for us, to see where the Spirit is at work and trying to lead us to.

We need to reform our thinking. We need to go back to the beginning. Start all over. To start over doesn't mean we go back fifty years to remember how good things used to be. That's what the people did in the wilderness with Moses. It's what led to them being bit and stung. It's not about trying to live in the past. Instead, it's about reforming our thinking, going back and seeing things in a new way.

Jesus knew Nicodemus was a good teacher, a smart one. But Nicodemus was still working on linear thinking and stuck on the notion that none of us can go back. Instead, we must all go back and start over, by being born of water and Spirit, by recognizing that we need to go back and start with God's intention for the world and for us in Genesis. It's going back and finding that wild Spirit at work, and embracing the change it always ushers in, instead of seeking to maintain the same old ways the Spirit has already passed by.

It's stepping outside our Chronos thinking, seeing only the way it's always been, and daring to imagine what new ways it could be, however fantastic those possibilities may be. This morning, I pray we as individuals, and as Christ's assembled body, can be swept up by that wind and become the change this world needs. Amen.

A Call to Serve

As we reflect on how we may share the blessings of our faith and righteousness through our prayers, our time, and our resources this week, May our outlook and perspective relay the good feelings, and positive outlook we as God's beloved are blessed to receive. May all that we give of ourselves, be blessed. And all that we receive enrich our lives and the lives of others.

A Time for Reflection - *Musical Interlude*

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Generous God,

May these gifts indicate our gratitude for our many blessings.
May the spiritual nourishment we receive today
strengthen us for continued service. Amen.

HYMN *For Christ and the Church* 416

Benediction

Through Christ we are given a new mirror, a new window, to see ourselves and the world. Through Christ, we know God's love is reflected in us and how we care for the earth and one another. Go, share the Good News, and reflect God's love in all you do and in how you care for others and the earth. Amen.

Postlude - *Musical Interlude*