

“Trust”

Genesis 12:1-4a; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17;
John 3:1-17

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This week, we again are given an Old Testament text that is one of those founding stories. It gives us a description of Abraham hearing God invite him to go on a journey. That particular moment is a defining moment for Abraham. In Romans, it is the story Paul is pointing back to, that Abraham trusted in God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. At that moment, Abraham trusted God enough to pick up his things, his family, and go on a journey. I don't think it even says where he's going at that point. He just picks up and goes.

As I was thinking about that, I wondered what it would take, what I would need to hear in my life and what I would have to trust, to just pick up and go on a journey. How might God be calling? It made me think about that issue of trust. What is it that we trust and how do we decide what we trust? Trust is that assured reliance on the character, ability, strength or truth of someone or something. What do we hold onto as the things that we rely on?

Yesterday we had a Session retreat, and one of the things I asked our Session to do was to think about various stories in their lives and how those stories may have shaped them. I think there are particular stories in my life that I just trust, almost without thinking about it. Now, by story, I don't mean a book that I'm actually reading. One of the stories in my family's life was “education equals success.” The more educated you are, the more successful you are. I've had to reassess that over the course of my life. I'm not sure I quite equate education and success, but it was the story that I grew up with.

There are other stories in our lives that probably shape us as well. When I was pretty young, 4 or 5, I was put in the hospital with dehydration. I probably had the flu and was very sick. I remember that I had an IV and the nurse needed to change it, so she sent my mother out of the room. My comfort was taken away from me. That memory, that story, stayed with me, and I wonder if that's why I hated needles so much when I was growing up. Has that incident been the story that guides my thinking about the whole medical establishment?

There are all kinds of ways we can begin to wonder about how our stories might affect us. I don't want to go too far with this particular story, but you begin to see the kind of thinking that might come out of the stories in our lives.

We have something going on right now, the spread of the coronavirus, where we have to try to understand what story we should listen to. How does it shape our lives, and how will it shape our lives? We have to begin to wonder about the stories in our lives, what we trust and what we don't trust, and how what we trust may truly affect us in some way. What we trust matters. I think Lent asks us to look at what stories we have,

what stories do we trust. Do we trust in Abraham's story as a story of faith, as a story of one listening to God and hearing God tell him to go on a journey, and doing so? Do we trust that God is continuing to speak into our lives and to invite us into a journey, or to a life, or to a particular way of caring?

I think my stories are continually confronted. One of the stories of my life is that I should take care of myself. I think over time I have heard that story over and over again in certain ways from various sources. When there's a crisis, I need to take care of myself. It seems like in a situation in which we may need to isolate, that would be the right story. Except that if you're isolated and you need something, how do you get it? You need somebody else.

I was reading an article that suggested in crisis, what we really need is not our own stockpile, but to know what the next guy has and how we're going to share those things. When a tornado goes through, it may take a small path, but if it's my path, I'm the one who needs the help. It made me think about that story I have about it being about me, and realizing that, no, it's about us. It's about how do we work together.

Is God a God who says, "There's a problem. I'm sure glad I don't have to deal with that problem. I'm going to pull back and take care of myself." It feels like God is *not* that kind of God. God *doesn't* pull back. He doesn't say, "The world has all kinds of problems. I'm sure glad I don't have to have anything to do with them." God does just the opposite. God sees the struggles and the problems of our world, and God so loves the world that God enters into the crisis and engages with it, and invites us to recognize that, and to accept the very gift of God's love, the grace that is the healing salve that we need for our crisis.

Perhaps Nicodemus was coming to see Jesus because he wondered if Jesus was really telling a story that he could trust. I don't know exactly why Jesus decided that he needed to engage Nicodemus with some kind of weird scripture, some difficult stuff. When he tells Nicodemus that the wind blows where it will—Eugene Peterson talks about the invisible affecting the visible—I think what he's saying is that it is just reality. You don't have control over God. God is just like the wind. You don't know where the wind is going, and you don't have control over it. Neither do we have control over God. God is going to work in God's way. It's not for us to shape God; it's for God to shape us. Especially in a world where we're so sure of all that is material, when Jesus is saying the invisible shapes the visible, I think he's saying something we see all the time, but perhaps we are so used to it we don't even think about it. We're so wanting to have something we can manipulate and control more easily that we leave out the invisible stuff.

The wind is one of those things we think about, but we can think of other ways and other aspects of our lives in which the invisible affects the visible. I know the love of my mother for me shaped who I am in pretty tangible ways. But can I show you her love? No. But the invisible sure shaped the visible for me. I think we're in a world where there's much more of that going on than we expect. Our stories shape us. Sometimes

we don't even think about them because they are not tangible things. They are not a piece of wood, but they are real. They happened to us. We experienced them. They shaped the way we think. They may shape the way we live.

So, Lent is a time when we are invited to think about what it is we trust. What are the stories? What are the things that shape us? How do we let the love of God shape us? God doesn't run away from a world in crisis. God comes into the world with grace and love to help us see that our sin, our mistakes, our way of going astray, doesn't have to shape us. Instead, we can let the love of God, the grace of God, lead us, show us what the world really is for—a place to care for one another, and to love one another, and to live with one another, and to share the joys and the beauty and the grace of the world.

It feels to me like this is a story that asks us, "Are you going to let fear and uncertainty and anxieties shape you, and reject the very grace of God because you can't control it and because it's not something you can see in the same way? What story are you going to trust?"

God is willing to be part of our story and to engage with us. God is willing to lead us to be God's people, to be the people who share their lives and are better off for it. To live with grace. To wonder at the love given us. We get to choose what we trust, who we trust, where we put that trust. Amen.