

## Hinges and Fulcrums

Perhaps we don't often think of our faith in large terms...not as often as we should really...certainly not as often as our Lord does. For example, if we take a minute to look at the final portion of the gospel text from John this morning...a portion which is often quoted and dearly loved...it is clear that the message is not just individual but cosmic...global...That so often quoted and loved verse is of John 3: 16 and 17 is "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." Of course, by its very inclusive nature, individuals are encompassed in this redemptive movement, but the intent...the purpose of the One who created the World was to redeem the World...not just a portion of it, but the whole of it. That intent, that purpose which is revealed throughout scriptures is something we need to constantly consider...and as we are again making this journey toward Jerusalem during the season of Lent...our readings from scripture invite us to think about the invitations...the calls which God makes...and our choices and responses along the way. Our first stop on this journey was to consider choices in the light of temptations...there was the choice of Adam and Eve contrasted with the choice of Jesus in the wilderness and how that was seen by the Apostle Paul in the book of Romans. That choice was presented with the focus on God's providing of ways for us to be in covenant relationship through obedience to the God's ways and then when we fail in that obedience, inviting us into the relationship through the obedience of his Son—Emanuel—God with us—in the person of Jesus who came and dwelled among us, was tempted but remained obedient. Today we again have readings where choices are being presented. The first reading is from the Hebrew Scriptures and is one of those familiar and fundamental passages of our faith as well as the faith which forms the root of ours—the Jewish tradition. In reading commentaries about this passage it is often referred to as a pivotal point in the narrative. Three of the major religions of the world are called Abrahamic faiths largely because of the narrative which begins with these four verses from Genesis 12 where we first learn of God's call to the man called Abram. It began this way: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." In our translations that is found as two sentences. In the original documents, there were no punctuations; not only were there no chapters and paragraphs, there were no sentences; so how these words are separated are to some extent always a matter of interpretation. Nevertheless, no matter how you look at this opening of the conversation between God and Abram...there is a great deal being communicated. What happens in Genesis during the first few chapters is presented in the form of some short scenes...some brief pictures of God's activity in a few instances...as with Cain and Abel, with Noah and the building of the Ark, and the scattering after the tower of Babel but there are no pictures of prolonged interactions between God and a human being until we get to this passage. And there is no build up to explain why God begins this conversation with Abram. We are told who Abram's father was—Terah. We are given his uncle's name—Haran and that he was the father of Lot, who also plays a significant role in the narrative. But except for the fact that the family originally came from the Ur in the land of the Chaldean, we know nothing of them. We know that they left Ur and were on their way into the land of

Canaan but for some reason, when they came to Haran, they settled there. There is no mention of their faith, of their worship practices. The record does not say why Terah began his journey, nor why he stopped when and where he did. His choices are not essential to the narrative which begins here about the people who would become God's chosen. We do not know if Abram has had any previous contact with the Lord; any other signs that God had a plan or purpose for him. What we do know is that God chose to issue an invitation to this man named Abram and this begins a narrative that is foundational for us. Abram was invited to enter into a relationship but was given very little information on which to base his choice. "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." In some ways the directions on what he was to do were very clear...he was to pick up and go...away from home and most of his family...but the where was not only vague...it was totally unspecified. He was to pick up and go and trust he would be shown as he went. Although it is not actually within the verses chosen for today, we learn that at the time of this invitation Abram was seventy-five years old so he was probably well established in Haran, comfortable. Later the text tells us he had a wife and a household. Yet we don't sense any great delay in the response given by Abram. Verse 4 states simply: "So Abram went, as the Lord had told him." In the Epistle reading today Paul very clearly wants it understood that it is Abram's trust in God's word to him which led to his getting up and leaving home and kindred which God accounted to Abram as righteousness, not any legal behavior. This is important as we consider our choices...for we have to admit that they are not always the best ones. The Pharisees placed all their trust in the Law given to Moses, which Paul points out was not even given until long after Abram's entrance into the covenant relationship with God. That relationship was built on the basis of this trusting in God's word. Even then, as the Genesis narrative shows us, Abram falters and stumbles along the way. Yet throughout it all, God remains faithful. And the invitation to covenant relationship is issued again and again. When God first issued the invitation to Abram, God said: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." Abram did not live to see the truth of this in his own children, but God's was faithful to the people who came from Abram, even when they turned away from the covenant promises they had made. And through the revealed truth given in the narrative of Abram's life and relationship with God, the covenant created has been and continues to be a blessing for those called to be God's people. This brings us to the narrative from John's gospel. This setting is quite different and full of symbolism. Nicodemus, we are told is a leader of the Jews. He is a Pharisee and therefore well versed in the Law. But he does not come to Jesus openly. Instead, he comes to him by night. Nicodemus comes proclaiming Jesus must be a teacher who has come from God because of the signs which he has been doing. These bits of information give us some clues about what John wants us to know. It is not clear exactly why Nicodemus comes to Jesus in darkness. Is he hiding this encounter? Has what he has heard or witness caused him to question what he has been taught or is teaching? But what we do know from the way John's gospel employs darkness is that Nicodemus is not a believer. So what Nicodemus has said: "You are a teacher who has come from God." is not an acceptable confession of belief to Jesus. It is not acceptable to just recognize the signs of power, but to move beyond that: to be "born again from above." This declaration just confuses Nicodemus. And in fact, it has given rise to much confusion throughout history as to just what this means; to be born again has often been used as a theological slogan which sounds wonderful but can be

twisted and made meaningless. Nicodemus responds to the literal implications of Jesus' statements. Birth...again? This is absurd, what you say. Limited in his belief to what he can see, not so unlike it is with the signs, those things he can visually see, he can now only hear Jesus responding in riddles. In many ways the remaining portion of this passage can leave us in much the same state as Nicodemus..."What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is Spirit." Reading these verses, I admit to having some sympathy with Nicodemus who goes away confused. Yet the revealed truth of the passage lies in the continued invitation by our Lord into relationship...and that when we accept that invitation to discipleship...to membership in the called body of Christ...there is an indwelling of the Spirit which can transform us...which can alter our perceptions and inclinations...which can change all that we are into more closely resembling what we are called to be in our Lord. Jesus was asking that Nicodemus look beyond the visible and into what changes needed to be made within himself in his understanding of what the Lord requires of the faithful. A friend, Rev. Ken Fuquay reposted a Facebook video he had done about three years ago which seems appropriate to this thought. The song he recorded this is called the Man in the Mirror. The lyrics remind us that that is where any changes must occur, they must begin with the person one sees in the mirror. And those changes do not occur, or are even recognized as being needed without the presence of the Spirit. Nicodemus did not understand and went away, still in the dark. Sometimes we fail to continue our looking for that light provided in the choices we make as well. The way that Abram answered the invitation of God is one of the hinge points in our faith narrative. The way we answer God's call upon our lives is reflected in the choices we make along the way by the guiding light of the Spirit. The response that God is looking for is the response of Abram; the response of complete trust. That way that of responding with complete trust—is the hinge which holds our faith in place. So this narrative hinge about Abram is also a hinge for us. Hinges are things which hold two things together at important places. The following of the guidance given by the teachings of Jesus and the wisdom of the Spirit are fulcrums of support. These places found in Scripture and in our faith are points which provide support for what follows in our lives of discipleship, points necessary for the forward movement. When we think of Abram's response to God's invitation and Nicodemus' confusion about Jesus' invitation to look beyond the visible to being transformed, we are also being invited to consider those things that are hinges and fulcrums in our life of faith as we continue this journey of Lenten observation. No matter our daily choices, we have the words of John 3: 16-17 to give us comfort and assurance as we make the journey. "For God so love 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." Thanks be to God.