

Resting on Grace

Our reading from Paul's letter to the Romans to the churches in Rome has a central theme about God's nature—about that love which is proclaimed so clearly in the Gospel reading from the 3rd Chapter of John. We remember that verse John 3:16 but rarely do we associate it with that visit of Nicodemus to Jesus by night. In that passage we often pick up another phrase and either wonder with Nicodemus about this possibility of being born again, or we assume we understand it better than we do. Paul's letter is also about the breadth and depth of God's love and how we so often fail to appreciate the gift God's actions have given us—because we are centered on our actions, not God's. Paul's message centers on Abram and God's call and promise which form the lynchpin of our faith—our faith which rests on God's grace. It often amazes me how many folks fail to see that God's grace is described, characterized and illustrated frequently in the Hebrew Scriptures. Genesis represents something that all cultures of the world share—it is an ancestor story. Ancestor stories tell the traditions of the ancestors and how these ancestors formed the community. The biblical narrators recount how God blesses God's creation...despite the many disasters which flow from humanities rejections of God's offers. Genesis 1-11 recounts the beginnings of the world. There are two dominant themes within these chapters: beginning with the tendency for human beings to rebel against their Creator and the judgments which follow followed by the continued blessing of God that sees to address and be in relationship with humanity in spite of divine judgment. The first theme is a repetitive one expressed by the eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, the fratricide of Cain, the total depravity and violence of the world before the flood, and the erecting of the Tower of Babel. Time after time these actions bring judgment but judgment does not have the final word. God continually finds a way to bless humanity...addressing Adam and Eve's curse by providing clothing; marking Cain to protect him from retribution, and creating a covenant with Noah after the flood. Only the judgment following the Tower of Babel is not immediately has an action which addresses the scattering of the peoples. This begins to be addressed through the calling of Abram and his descendants—because through them “all nations will be blessed.” Genesis 12 is a transitional text which begins a new approach by God to return creation to the state in which it was created through a relationship begun with one family. In Genesis 12:1 God commands Abram to leave his country, his kindred, and his father's house—all that is known and familiar—to go to a destination not named in order to receive the blessings promised. This call to Abram represents a new strategy to address the evil and violence present in all humanity. The inexact nature of Abram's destination is set in contrast to the specific details of what he must leave behind. Abram begins his journey without a map. In response to God's call and promises, Abram's response is to obedience. He packs up his wife and some extended family and goes. The response of Abram and God's promises will be the main weave of the remaining chapters of Genesis. The election by God of this family to be a chosen and special vehicle of God's blessing affirms God's continuing commitment to humans and the world in spite of their rebellion, violence and evil. God will not let go of God's creation.

That God chose a barren husband and wife to be a blessing to others emphasizes that it is first and foremost God's power and initiative that will accomplish God's purposes. Of course, human obedience is from the very first involved—God says Go...and Abram went. But Abram's

trust in God's commitment to fulfil the promises made provide the energy and will to follow God's commands. The promise made from the beginning shows that although the focus was on one particular family the intent was designed for them to be a funnel for God's blessing all the earth. God's people are often tempted to turn inward, to worry about their own survival, to consider themselves as God's only concern, or to ignore the community in which they live...but those are not God's intentions. In its words concerning the blessing to come to all nations Genesis 12 reminds us that the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it. Genesis 12 begins the journey for Abram and Sari which leaves behind an old life and looks forward to a future not yet visible. For us, the season of Lent is a season that can help us to let go of old commitments and burdens, freeing us to journey into new territories, new promises, new hopes and new lives as we seek to find how God wants to use us for God's purposes. When God made that call upon Abram God unsettles Abram and Sari, both literally and figuratively. They are separated from everything that has rooted them. God calls Abram to shift his identity from rootedness in his land, his family, and household...the loss of all that he has previously known to being one who is acted upon by God...this call requires not only a physical change but also a spiritual re-orientation. God's promises do not spare Abram and his family from danger, desperation, jealousy, heartbreak or grief. On their journey they will lose things and people held dear. Yet this passage reminds us that their journey is not about what they are doing but what God is doing. Their journey begins a process that will restore human and nonhuman creation so that all may be able to live in harmony with God's original intention for the world. God's choice of Abram is an initially exclusive move for the sake of the future of the entire world. God makes promises and God keeps those promises throughout the generations. Again and again, face with multiple harsh realities God keeps the promises God has made—especially the one in Genesis 28:16 which is still kept today: I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go...I will not leave you. That the narrative centers on Abram and his family does not entail a new divine objective for the world...it presents a clearer view of God's strategy for moving toward God's original plan for the world—they are the vehicle which God will use. God and God actions are the repeated subjects of the narrative while Abram is the agent through which God works to solve the dilemma created by sin and evil. This is the message which the Apostle Paul is trying to convey. Paul perceives that too many have understood Abram's importance as being rooted in his obedience; often proclaiming he was obedient to God's laws when those Laws had not yet been given. Although Paul does not know these early churches, he does know that the Roman communities are drawn from diverse backgrounds, some of them from the Jewish tradition and others not. They are venturing out on a journey which like Abram's call is unsettling, needing to leave behind old ways and understandings. Abram was claimed as the father of the children of Israel but he had lived before the giving of the Torah, the Law to Moses. Yet many ignored that and proclaimed he had been honored by God BECAUSE he observed the law. Paul, however says Abram as a father but not one in the law but one in faith. He feels it is important for the believers to honor Abram through a recasting of his relationship with God as one of faith, that he was a model for faithful behavior, a faithful servant of God. It is important for us on our Lenten journey to learn to reject old patterns and old ways of thinking which might keep us from understanding God's gift of grace and new life for us—and God's purpose of the restoration of all humanity through those called into his serving his purpose and plan. One commentary linked this to customs we

have engrained early in our lives like how we cross streets, or drive on one side of the road—both things oriented to looking or staying right. This is the rule in our country, but in Europe that not their orientation and in London at intersections because of the number of foreign tourists not trained to that orientation you can see stenciled the words “look right” if you look down. Those Jewish Christians hearing Paul’s words might have felt as if they were foreigners being given a warning to “look right”. It was crucial for Paul that they understand Abram was not justified by works, by obedience but to challenge them to see in Abram a faithful servant of God. Paul observes Abram was made right with God through God’s gracious gift and that then Abram believed God. That is how it works for us as well: we are justified by grace through faith. This passage from Genesis has been used throughout the New Testament to establish how we are gathered by God into that covenant relationship God had with Abram. To be part of Abram’s family by faith is to be an inheritor of God’s promises, to be in covenant relationship with God is to be justified. All these phrases are in apposition to each other. All of them describe who we are and whose we are. It is really important for us to understand God’s promises given in Genesis as from the beginning to have been made to all peoples. In Romans, Paul is not contrasting faith in general with works in general. This is not an argument about believing versus doing. On the contrary, Paul can describe the entire goal of his ministry as the bringing about of the right kind of doing, the obedience of faith. He is contrasting entrusting ourselves to the specific, saving narrative of Jesus with defining ourselves by the Law that God gave to Israel. The latter leads to understanding that checking off keeping of the law brings salvation instead of relying on God’s grace to accomplish that. Since we never can merit God’s grace by our actions, our doing we need to keep resting in God’s grace as we strive to follow our Lord’s teachings about love for God and neighbor. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.