

Divergence on the Lectionary - Second Sunday in Lent, Year A

First Reading

Genesis 12:1–4a

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And 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. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. (ESV)

Second Reading

Romans 4:1–5, 13-17 (omitted verses in italics)

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, (ESV)

just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:

*“Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven,
and whose sins are covered;
blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.”*

Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not

merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.

That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. (ESV)

Gospel Text

John 3:1–17

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, 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 the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And 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, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First and Second Reading

I’m going to roll the first and second readings for this week together, because they’re so deeply intertwined. We have read the call of Abraham through the Church’s interpretation of Paul (perhaps most especially through Luther) that we’ve forgotten to let Paul speak for himself, and to read Paul’s arguments in Romans (and likely elsewhere, but I haven’t tried to take this farther yet) in the context of a Jewish understanding of Abraham’s call in the time of the Second Temple, the understanding that shaped Paul’s thought.

The decision to pair Genesis 12 with Romans 4 is indicative of our Christian predilection for reading Abraham as a sort of antetype of Luther. When Paul cites Abraham’s belief, and God’s reckoning of that to him as righteousness, Paul is referring to Genesis 15, not 12.

Genesis 15:1–6

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.” And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.” And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness. (ESV)

We want to carry the faithfulness of this passage in Genesis 15 back into Genesis 12, but that’s not how Paul would have read Genesis 12. Not at all. Rabbinic thought and teaching about the Call of Abraham during that time was quite different. Philo and Josephus give us two somewhat different approaches to interpreting God’s call to Abraham to leave his people, but as one scholar has said, these ideas were likely current as part of Second Temple Judaism.

Why did God call Abraham out of Ur, out from among the Chaldeans? This is the question Jewish thinkers tried to answer, to reason out. And their answers had little to do with faith.

An article by Dr. Paul Mandel helped me to understand the ways this question would have been answered in Paul's studies.

Dr. Mandel's article isn't focused on Paul or his time at all, but he discusses some of the history of the Jewish interpretations of Abraham's call leading up to one particular *midrash* that he does want to discuss. While laying out his foundations, Dr. Mandel cites two early Jewish writers, Philo and Josephus, whose explanations of the call of Abraham were (in his words) "current in the late Second Temple period among Jewish (Hellenistic) circles."

I'd really like you to read the article (or at least the early portions of it) for yourself, so I'll post a link to the article below, because I can't do justice to it in summary, but it's too much to try to cram into this one Divergence. So here I go, trying to give a thumbnail.

Philo sees Abraham set in the world of Chaldean astronomy. Chaldeans had seen the order of the movement of the heavenly bodies and "concluded that the world itself was God." Abraham, raised in this system noticed something unnoticed before, a "charioteer and pilot" who directed all this motion. God then speaks to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3) and shifts Abraham's focus from the material world to the study of humankind.

Josephus explains Abraham's call differently. Set against the same "material world as god" background, the same idolatrous, astronomical teachings, Abraham again comes first to the conclusion that there is in fact only one God, one creator of all things. But in Josephus' understanding, Abraham comes to this conclusion by noticing the irregularities in the courses of heavenly objects, thereby deriving the idea that there must be a higher authority.

From these and other rabbinic teachings Dr. Mandel then points to three "motifs" that characterize the thought concerning Abraham in the late Second Temple period. (Paul's time.)

- 1) Abraham searches and discovers the one God, the Creator, through his own intellectual contemplation.
- 2) God's command to Abraham to leave his homeland is seen as a response to an initiative on the part of Abraham.
- 3) This initiative is related to Abraham's contemplation of the physical universe, the conduct of which - whether orderly or disorderly - cannot explain its own

existence. Abraham is thus led to recognize the significance of the transcendent God, who is not only Creator of the world, but also its governor and commander.

From this we can learn that Paul didn't see Genesis 12 as God just speaking to Abraham "out of the blue." This also creates a backdrop against which to read Romans 1:18-23. We can see where Paul's reasoning for that comes from.

Okay. As I used to ask my classes when I was teaching New Testament on Long Island, "So what?" What difference does all that make, Jeff?

Here's what it means to me.

It doesn't take anything away from the faith that was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness, but it changes the way I understand it. Abraham didn't set out on his journey from Ur in "faith." That was more like "obedience." His faith is in the promise of God that he will have an heir, that he will, in fact, be the father of many nations. It's in the promise. Not the obedience.

And this draws me inexorably back to the beginning of Jesus' ministry, especially as it is related in Matthew, where Jesus presents Himself to John for baptism in order "to fulfill all righteousness." Obedience. And then comes the long sojourn. 40 days of barrenness in which he will trust in the Father's promise.

And that leads me to consider Lent in a new way. Instead of a time of deprivation, it becomes a wilderness time in which I meditate on God's promise to me. I present myself on Ash Wednesday and have my mortality (like my death in baptism) confirmed, but that doesn't change the voice that spoke over me in the same baptism, "You are my beloved child." Taking the root meaning of "repentance" from the Greek, I allow this meditation to "change my thinking," "change my mind."

Hmmm.. Something new for me for Lent.

Here's that link I promised. [The Call of Abraham: A Midrash Revisited](#)

Before I go on, a humorous aside. As I was struggling to boil all that stuff down for this Divergence, trying to find words for it all, I realized that I had a theme song playing in my head. My wife and I are big fans of BBC television and Poirot among our favorite shows. And it was the theme song to Poirot that was playing in my head. No doubt because I was burning up "ze leetle gray cells" that remain to me!

Gospel Text

I really need to start out by apologizing for the ESV translation. Lately I've been told that it is influenced more deeply by conservative theology than I'd believed, and today is one of the days that this assertion is confirmed. I will still use it, as it's generally better than most I've seen, but I now understand that even the translators' "word for word" strategy is secondary to their theology. It is glaringly apparent in their decision to translate John 3:3 using the phrase "born again." Many of you, hearing the Gospel read from the NRSV on Sunday, will be spared that, hearing it as it should be translated, "born from above," which is the proper way to translate *anōthen* in this instance. But conservative Christians just couldn't let go of that phrase.

Okay. Back to the story. Sorry. Thing is, there are so many things that can be written about this conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus that I feel badly trying to focus on just one. And the one I am most moved to write about may be the least interesting to you. But I'm trying to follow where I'm led.

As esoteric and difficult as Jesus' speech in this week's passage is, He is very clear about it. He's not even talking about "heavenly things" but earthly things. And the earthly thing He's trying to get across is that unless we are "born from above," "born of water and the Spirit," the things of God, the Kingdom of God is beyond us, beyond the reach of our faculties, our reason.

And none of this, not a word of it is about who gets into heaven and who goes to hell. It is about the way that Holy Spirit opens our eyes to realities, the reality of the Kingdom, that we simply cannot see apart from that assistance. I'm reminded of one of those cute videos that circulate through the Internet every so often. This one is the one where a baby is given an incredibly thick pair of glasses for the first time and so first really sees his mother. And he beams, absolutely beams at her. The source of his joy was right there all along, but he couldn't really see her.

There are heavenly things, things about the Kingdom that Jesus himself said is right here among us, that remain invisible to us apart from the assistance of the Holy Spirit. We can be teachers, teachers of the "new Israel" if you like, and still not see or understand these things. I know that I was for a good while. I was a good teacher, a popular teacher of the New Testament at our diocesan school on Long Island. Like Nicodemus I kept coming to the Scriptures for something I could feel was there, something I knew I wanted, but I just couldn't make it out.

There came a time in my career, in my life, when all my knowledge wasn't enough, and I crashed. Crashed hard. And in the midst of that desert time, with the help and guidance of others, I found myself one day on the floor of a small church in Pennsylvania,

laughing and crying at the same time as I was inundated by the love of my Father in Heaven as Holy Spirit opened to me the truth of who I am to Him and who He wants to be to me. Twenty years later I'm still exploring that reality, still discovering the ways that it changes what I read when I look at the Scriptures. That's a big part of why I'm still writing these Divergences in retirement. I'm still desperate to discover the enormity of my inheritance in Jesus.

And yes, I want that for you, the few folks who actually read this stuff. I don't expect it of you, I want it for you. I know that each of us will come to that place of laughing and crying at the same time in our own time, in our own way, when God knows it's the right time. But I write this because I dare to hope that I can awaken a hunger in you for the things of the Kingdom that you just can't see without the Spirit's help.

And I had no idea that was where I was going when I started this. As I learned from a truly gifted prophet, Bob Hazlett, you can't steer a ship that isn't moving. Sometimes God needs you to just open your mouth and start talking (or typing?) so that He can steer you. I hope that's what just happened!