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Emanuel's Ev. Lutheran Church • Bellevue (Pittsburgh), PA  
March 20, 2011 • Second Sunday of Lent (A)

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

It is so easy for us to have low expectations of God, or of our faith. We get used to how our normal faith life fits into weekly routine. Perhaps we pray and go to church on Sunday. Even then, God can quickly fall into the background of our lives, in a barely noticeable way – sort of like wallpaper (or paint). It's in some room of our lives every single day and we barely notice. It may set a tone for what we do, but it doesn't actually do anything. There are seasons of our lives when God seems like just like that. Not like an active being, or a dynamic relationship. Just a thing... that may not even need to be there.

In this season of Lent, we are re-engaging as disciples of Jesus Christ. We are re-considering our relationship with God and what faith is all about. Our readings contain BIG reminders of the kinds of things that God has done, and continues to do, in human life. Today is a refresher for our poor memories, which we all need from a good friend every once in a while. It's also a bit of a jolt – for us to attend to the wondrous work of God in our world, and in us.

**Bringing a nation to birth**

Our Old Testament text from *Genesis* is the beginning of the long story of Abram and Sarai. In our short lesson today, God called Abram with an invitation to a new vocation. And God offered promises that would come with it. Go away from all that you know, and God said, “I will make of you a great nation.” (*Gen. 12:2*) The God of Israel spoke to this one man and his family, and called them to follow. They were invited to go, and promised big dreams and possibilities. They would receive a new land of their own. They would grow to become a numerous nation, and they would be God’s people. But that’s not all! Ultimately “all the families of the earth [would] be blessed” through them. (*Gen. 12:3*)

What a huge invitation! Many of us, and many people around us, are as connected to where they live, as people were at Abram’s time. Folks just did not do this – pick up and go, leaving everything that they knew. Yet that’s exactly what Abram and Sarai did.

As Christians, who are grounded in this story of faith, we know that much more happened. This aged, and childless, couple, who quickly passed the age of bearing children, miraculously conceived a child who would help fulfill God’s promises. Isaac, and even his half brother, Ishmael, served as true blessings for the world. Centuries and centuries later, the faith of Jews and Christians and Muslims are all still grounded in these tales. God indeed blessed Abram’s family, and made their name great, so that they would be a blessing for the world. (*Gen. 12:2*)

## **Bringing us to spiritual birth**

Our gospel lesson from *John* speaks of a different kind of birth. It focused not the birth of God's chosen people, the nation of Israel. Instead Jesus tried to describe our spiritual birth as human beings.

A Pharisee named Nicodemus came to him, under cover of night. He spoke of Jesus' role in God's signs. For Nicodemus, Jesus was a gifted rabbi and teacher, one who bore the presence of God with him. What compliments! It's possible that Nicodemus had an entire conversation planned, or a laundry list of questions for Jesus. We don't know what Nicodemus planned to ask or discuss, for Jesus took over the conversation. Jesus shifted his focus from the miracles or signs that indicated God's presence. He even shifted Nicodemus' focus away from Jesus entirely.

Instead, Jesus invited him to consider more deeply what God was doing in people's lives of faith. Through Jesus' life, God was inviting the people to something new: to a spiritual rebirth. Like many people in our own day, Nicodemus had understanding that the words were not literal. "Born from above"? (*Jn. 3:3*) How was that different from being born to begin with?

Jesus was trying to articulate the mystery and wonder of God's new creation, and new life. True life is more than having a body that works, or breath in our lungs. True, real life requires another sort of birth, through water and the Spirit. It's a birth of faith, and in faith. It's one brought by God alone. And in it, God changes us. We become directed by the Spirit,

instead of only by our desires. That change may lead us to make different choices than we would have, without God's guidance and action. We become new people – transformed by the Spirit. We Lutherans believe, along with many other Christians, that this transformation begins happening at baptism – and that baptism is a once-in-a-lifetime event. Our rebirth in Christ's Spirit happens on a certain date – mine was May 13, 1984 – though we may experience renewal or reconnection all along the way.

### **Bringing life from death**

Our gospel lesson then ends with one of the most famous verses in the Bible – displayed at countless sports games. It points toward another level of life that God brings to us. You are welcome to recite it along with me: “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.”

*(Jn. 3:16)*

In several weeks, our worship will journey through Jesus' passion and death. On Good Friday, we will recall the actual death of Jesus, God-with-us. Yet we know that his death was not the end of the story. His real death was transformed by God to become real life! And it wasn't life like Lazarus received – he was the friend whom Jesus resuscitated after he had been dead several days. One day Lazarus would die again, and remain that way until the resurrection of the dead. Jesus' resurrected life was real,

true, unending life, which would extend into time forever. As members of Christ, people grafted into his body through baptism, we know God's promise that we will receive that same gift.

In Christ, God showed that death does not have power over God's abundant life. God opens our hearts in faith so that we can trust this. And God opens our hearts to see the ways that God brings life from death all around us, here and now.

45 women, from here and all over, witnessed life growing from death at our women's retreat yesterday. All three of Emanuel's committee members who spoke and led discussions, about God's will for us – all three had experienced great losses to death within the last two years. The most recent was Ellen, whose mother died on Wednesday. We saw and heard faith and life that bloomed from the ground of grief and death.

24 people witnessed God bringing life from death on Wednesday night. Emanuel's, Trinity, and St. James gathered for our first Lenten worship and service together. Alone, none of our congregations could hold such a healthy mid-week worship right now. We have all experienced death of what our churches were in the past. And we are all beholding God doing something new among us. It may not be clear where God is leading us in the process. But it's hard to miss the energy, and the growing sense of community.



We worship a powerful God, who is far more active and involved in our lives – more than any wallpaper or paint could ever be. We worship a God who “gives life to the dead” – and who “calls into existence” new life, just as our Romans text says. (*Rom. 4:17*) Let us pray. Gracious God, restore us, renew us, bring us to life as only you can. Amen.