

## Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent: March 5, 2023 jj

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Abraham must have been hearing things. This idea about having a son in our nineties has to be considered an impossible dream now. So Sarah thought. We have to make our plans and take care of affairs so that more problems won't arise. We can't wait for God to act anymore. So she gave Hagar to Abraham, and she conceived for him a son. God helps those who help themselves? Apparently not, according to this story! Hagar's son Ishmael was not of the promise, but of the law, of bondage to doubt towards God. He and his seed would be the troublers and persecutors of the children of Abraham. He too would father a great and powerful nation, but Abraham and his succeeding generations will learn under the pain of constant strife to lament this decision in which Abraham took matters into his own hands. Middle-Eastern history and current events bear this out through the ages and to this very day.

Then at age ninety-nine and still childless with Sarah, Abraham continued to hope in the Lord. The foolish sign of circumcision was given-- Abraham, and his son Ishmael, and all the men of his house, were to go under the circumcision knife by God's command. Yet again, the unbelievable promise was renewed, "You shall be a father of many nations, and you shall be called Abraham. I will make you exceedingly fruitful. Also I give to you and your descendents after you all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God." Sarah shall bear to you a son, Isaac, at this set time. A foolish ritual, a promise of nations coming forth from a so-named "father of many" who yet remains childless, and a child from a mother whose age puts her beyond the ability to bear children; and yet the knife cuts, Abraham believes, with perhaps a few questions still occupying his mind, and Sarah just plain laughs.

Still, the Lord did for Sarah as He had spoken. She conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time which God had appointed. And the promise was made flesh, you could say. Then when eight days were completed for the circumcision of the child, his name was called Isaac, the name given to remind them of their laughter. Although it took many years to fulfill, the promise came through just as the Lord's Word had said it would. Even though Abraham stumbled and Sarah laughed, God in His undeserved grace made them the ancestors of all who believe, now including you, and all heirs of eternal life.

With a memorable story like this, you would think that loyal descendants of Abraham would never doubt the Lord's Word and promise ever again. Not so with Nicodemus! He was much more receptive to Jesus than most of the Jewish council, but still he had doubts and questions occupying his mind. He met with Jesus by night because of his fear, but he could also be doing his best to protect Jesus also. It seems that he arranged this clandestine meeting while the Lord was in the city of Jerusalem, celebrating the Passover- always a big event on Jesus' calendar. With the Passover liturgy and message fresh in his head, this thoughtful teacher of Israel may have caught the obvious references to Christ's own giving up of His life and Nicodemus wanted to talk further with the Lord about His miraculous signs.

But the interview suddenly takes an unexpected turn that throws the learned man off. He wanted Jesus to talk more about how He has fulfilled Scripture, or how it could be that He is the true Son of God like people are saying about Him. It's like Jesus cut him off at the knees and said the very thing He knew was on that puzzled man's heart. Nicodemus was trapped in a system that insisted on following the rules and

laws of God in order to gain eternal life. He thought Jesus could help him out of this difficulty. Just like Abraham thought the Lord's promise would finally come if he were to take Hagar to be his "baby mama" for hire, so also Nicodemus reeled back at the demand Jesus put forth: "Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." The only word he could hear is the one that makes it an impossibility—that's the word "again." When you say that, you might as well have said to him, you will have a son when you're 100 years old!

But the point Jesus was making was centered in the word "born" more so than in the word "again." When Nicodemus objected to that shocking statement, he immediately thought of biological logistics. He said: "How can a man enter his mother's womb a second time to be born?" You see? All he's thinking about is, "again." Jesus, on the other hand, is talking more about being born, born another way—a spiritual way, a way "from above" as the phrase Jesus used literally says. This is the way He came to this world to provide for all those who believe on His name, as John wrote in the introduction, chapter one: "He gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but [born] of God." (John 1:12-13) Without that kind of birth, no one is going to enter the kingdom of God.

That kind of birth is called being born of water and the spirit. It's baptism. It takes the Gospel, plainly stated in John 3:16, and it pours it out into your lap, or actually, on top of your head. From above. Think about that well-known verse as a gift personally to you—God loved me and gave me His Son, so if I'm a believer, I will have eternal life. If John 3:16 is learned all by itself, that's okay, but remember that that single verse by itself does not repeat an important point Jesus made earlier in chapter 3—an unstated link, which is: how do I become a believer, and receive this gift? Some Christians would then answer that question, you become a

believer once you commit your life for sure this time to Jesus. Others guess that you need to do certain steps of penance first. The Bible says: be baptized, and the Holy Spirit will give you the faith to believe in the Name of Jesus. Not that obeying God's command to be baptized earns you any points, it's rather more like Christ is saying, I've got it all done for you. The check is written and the money is guaranteed in the bank. Sign your name, and it's yours, no strings attached!

Does your heart accept this simple, Gospel truth, despite what your day-to-day painful experience tells you? Then that's an Abraham faith. Or do you fix your attention instead on some part of what you hear today that just doesn't make sense, or that in your guilt you think, if I were God, I wouldn't accept me, not after what I've done or how I've lived. Maybe your anger at God or someone else solidifies the impression you get that it's all just too good to be true. That's a Nicodemus-style skepticism.

You have probably found yourself somewhere in between those two. Nicodemus needed time to digest the precious Gospel Word that he heard late that one night. He got up the courage a little later to question why the Jewish council was not giving Jesus and His teachings the privilege of due process. (John 7:51) By the time the Great Passover sacrifice event happened on Calvary's hill, Nicodemus was ready to believe and act on that faith. John says in the Gospel that it was Nicodemus who provided the spices to anoint Jesus' body as He was laid in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. (John 19:39) God's Word may take its time to sink in for you, too. Wait for God to act, like Abraham had to wait patiently in faith. Resist the urge to take things into your own hands. But for today, for now, know this for certain: you have been born of water and the Spirit. The Spirit gives birth to Spirit. You were brought forth, you could say, from the womb of Christ's Bride and you are assured from His own mouth that you are forgiven, and you are God's child.

Believe it. This is your gift. Let your Nicodemus questions turn aside. Your Abraham faith, shining through your present weakness, will be counted in your Father's sight as righteousness, full acceptance, Christ's own perfection counted as yours.

It will still seem foolish. An impossible dream, perhaps. The questions may still come to your mind. Your weakness of the flesh will lead to stumbling. But your faith will endure, because it is not your own, it is God's gift to you; your heavenly destination rests on His grace. It was not true only for Abraham—you are counted as righteous too. You did not work, you did not commit your life, you simply admitted the truth: I am a sinner, and you rested firm, believing against all hope, in the knowledge that Christ came to save sinners. That means neither your sin, nor anything else you can think of, will ever prevent Divine grace from making you forgiven, pure and whole again, this very day and forever. Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not count his sin. You shall not perish, but have eternal life.

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.