

Sermon – Year A Lent 2
You *can* Teach an Old Dog New Tricks
Genesis 12.1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4.1-5, 13-17 and John 3.1-17

How many times do we hear the expression, “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks”? That was my first thought as I considered Abraham’s call to new life this week.

I’m thinking that in the learning and practicing “new tricks” Abram traveled the way of love, incorporating all seven steps: turn, learn, pray, worship, bless go and rest. And I thought about the age of the majority in our congregations and what we might do if called to totally uproot our lives to follow in Jesus’ footsteps.#

And, I couldn’t help but find myself down another rabbit hole on Monday of this week when I began to think about Abraham’s journey. Just a few short weeks ago I had read a book about the ancient Sumerians, of which Ur was a part. I discovered that Abraham was a Sumerian. The other interesting thing (and I’ve mentioned this before when talking about ancient sites), is that what was known as Ur is now Iraq. Whenever I think about that it brings to mind that, despite history and cultural and scientific

advances, we've not advanced much in human relationships, have we. Despite our knowledge and expansion throughout the whole world, we still return to the middle east where it all began.

God selected Abram. God spoke to Abram. God instructed Abram to leave his country, his relatives and all that he knew ... his culture, his inheritance ... to accept a new life ... a new way of living and to receive God's blessing as he obeyed God's command. The reading ends at the first part of verse four, omitting the part that says, "Abram was 75 years old when he departed from Haran."

75 years old. Hmmm. What does that say to us this morning? Personally it says to me, "Leave it up to someone with some age on them, they're bound to have a certain amount of wisdom, certainly experiences that can lead to a positive outcome ... and they're reliable."

And then we move on to Nicodemus. He was a learned, respected member of the Sanhedrin (meaning that he was part of the supreme council and tribunal of the Jews during

postexilic times headed by a High Priest and having religious, civil, and criminal jurisdiction). He doesn't quite understand what Jesus means by being born from above, or again or anew. He gives away his age in his question of Jesus, "How can anyone be born after having grown old?" And Nicodemus received Jesus' response. Little did Nicodemus know that the spirit; his being born from above would give him the courage challenge the Jewish authorities to try to make certain that Jesus had a fair trial ... and that he would also be there to help prepare Jesus' body for burial.

And, I must include myself in this list of "oldsters" whom God has called out new life. I was already 58 years old when I heard the call from behind a magnificent rainbow, "I want you to be my priest in retirement." I was ordained to the priesthood at age 66 and at age 84, still serving!

But, let's go back to Abram for a moment. He and his wife Sarai had no children. Yet God promised them as many children as there are stars in the sky (despite their ages). First of all, they had to learn all new ways to travel. And granted, some of the "tricks"

Abram used, as he pawned his wife off to one ruler as his sister to protect their lives, were not of God. But he had to learn a new way of living. He had to learn as a very, very old man what it was like to be a father when he was old enough to be a great-grandfather and then some. He was sent into a new culture, he was vulnerable to the world.

And Nicodemus. He eventually jumped ship so to speak. This aged scholar and statesman had to give up previous learning and learn all over again what it meant to live the way God intended him to live, through the words and works of Jesus.

So, dear ones, our journeys are not dissimilar to either Abram (whom God eventually named Abraham) or Nicodemus. You have been chosen for the place you now occupy in this adventure. As you continue to learn and grow and reach out ... and succeed ... you are continually being ordained gradually by God for this purpose.

It is not because you are old... or young...or somewhere in-between. It is because you are just the right age; you are the age that God intended and has invited you to join God on this journey.

Perhaps humans are incapable of teaching “old dogs new tricks” but God is always capable of doing so. He is proving it right here and right now through each and every one of you.

F. Douglas Powe, Jr., assistant professor of Evangelism, St. Paul School of Theology, Kansas City, MO, suggests in his meditations for *Disciplines* that “We become recipients of God’s promise right now as we open ourselves to the Spirit –even as we move toward God’s ultimate act of reconciliation through Jesus in the future. We become prayerful about discerning God’s word and become an embodiment of the Word for others. Standing on the promises of God recenters our living around the gifts of new life, and our faith draws others to Jesus.”¹ I truly believe that we are in the midst of this experience on this second Sunday of Lent.

¹ *Disciplines, A Book of Daily Devotions 2011*, The Upper Room, Upper Room Books, 2010, p. 91.

In Eugene Peterson’s translation of scripture known as *The Message*, the final line of the Gospel this week translates as, “God didn’t go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again.”² And that is our job, too, ‘to put the world right again’ as we go about establishing a new presence, not just in this place but with St. Augustine’s to establish ministries we are not even yet aware of in the future.

Perhaps some time this week as part of your Lenten disciplines you may want to see how you connect with the historic Bible as you continue the story.

*Disciplines*³ suggests you ask yourself questions about this week’s readings.

Genesis – Think of a time when you have had a crossroads experience. Did you listen for God’s plan in all of this? How did you do that? We’re at a crossroads right now, learning how to be church in 2023.

² Peterson, Eugene, *The Message*, NAVApres, Colorado Springs, CO, 1995, p. 193.

³Shepherd, Barrie, *Disciplines 2020*, The Upper Room, Nashville TN, 2020 Ebook edition (paraphrased)

With the Psalm, think on a time when you experienced something similar? Did you feel God's presence?

With Romans, how do you feel about the fact that it is not the law, but your faith alone that is your salvation. And with that in mind, how does it motivate you to go good works when you are called by God?

And, as you hear John 3.1-17 for yet another time, how does that familiar phrase that "God so loves the world that he gave his only begotten son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." bring comfort to you as you move through this season of self-examination and penitence ?

And/or, you may wish to join us (at St. A's) for the shared Lenten journey as St. Paul's and St. A's member come together for soup and study ... learning *The Way of Love* on Wednesday evening's at 6 p.m. Last week we "turned". This week we'll "learn".

May our journeys, no matter how we plan to devote time to acknowledge and participate in Lenten disciplines continue to be

blessed as we become more confident of God's work within us to
serve others outside of us in the week ahead. Amen.