



February 17, 2008

Focus scripture
John 3:1-17

Additional scriptures
Genesis 12:1-4a
Psalm 121
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

We are grateful, O God, that we may come to you with answers and questions, with hopes and fears. Open us to words that can change us. Open us to new life that beckons us. Open us to see we are loved by you in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Respect and Challenge

One teacher ventures out at night to meet another. Respect and challenge mark their encounter. Ambiguous language opens rather than closes conversation. At stake, then and now, is the potential for birthing to new life and opening to God's blessing. Faith beckons us to go out from what is known and journey toward the One whose promises are trusted.

Focus Scripture: John 3:1-17

Most of the focus passages through the seasons of Lent and Easter this year are from John. Today's scripture introduces a pattern that is common throughout this gospel: Jesus speaks, but his words are misunderstood. The misunderstanding leads to further teaching by Jesus that reveals deeper meanings. Key words like *believe*, *see*, *know*, *life*, and *send* provide a framework for action and dialogue, here and in later texts. Jesus' conversation partner in this passage is Nicodemus, a leading Pharisee of the day. Later, we encounter Nicodemus as one who defends Jesus and helps with his burial (see John 7:50; 19:39).

Examples of the open-ended nature of Jesus' language in John are found in two words of this text. First is *anōthen* in verse 3. Coupled with the verb *born*, this Greek word can mean "born again," "born from above," and "born anew." The question is not which meaning is right. All are. A second example is in verse 8. In Greek and Hebrew, one word serves for both "wind" and "spirit." In both languages, it is also the same word for "breath." Such language encourages openness to layers of meaning in what Jesus says. Nicodemus misunderstands, as others do later, by settling for only one meaning.

One major difference between the gospel of John and the other gospels comes in the use of "kingdom of God." In John, "kingdom of God" occurs only in John 3:3, 5. In John, the content and decision of faith are not focused so much on God's coming realm or how persons align themselves with it. Rather, the issue is how people (we) respond to Jesus, whom God has sent.

The lifting up of the serpent in verse 14 alludes to Numbers 21:8-9. The people of Israel in their wilderness sojourn complained against God. A plague

of poisonous snakes had been sent as punishment. Healing would come only by looking up at a bronze serpent lifted up on a pole.

John 3:16-17 stamps the gospel of John – and Christian faith as a whole – with the theme of God's blessing. Love is declared to be God's fundamental disposition toward creation. God's love sets the stage for Jesus' later commanding of love for the practice of faith. These verses also invoke words that John will return to continually: *believe*, *eternal life*, *send*, *save*. All will be further developed in later passages to invite the readers and hearers into faith.

The theme of God's blessing runs through all the texts. **Genesis 12:1-4a** identifies Abram and Sarai (later named Abraham and Sarah) as not only blessed of God, but as the source of blessing for all of Earth's families. The second half of **Psalm 121** is a benediction that pronounces God's blessing. **Romans 4:1-5, 13-17** speaks of blessing as our being reckoned with "righteousness," a word whose meaning has to do with our acceptance before God.

Trust connects us to God's blessing. **Genesis 12:1-4a** implicitly narrates the trust of Abram and Sarai as they journey. **Romans 4:1-5, 13-17** makes that trust explicit on Abraham and Sarah's part, and on our own. The opening four verses of **Psalm 121** assert the psalmist's trust in God.

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We encounter God's love through Jesus. Faith invites us to make that affirmation our own. Place yourself in the shoes of Nicodemus. What questions or affirmations would you bring to Jesus? In what ways have you experienced birthing to new life, or life from above? Where, and with whom, might faith be calling you to venture through this Season of Lent?

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