

"Go forth, Abraham... make a new life in the new land which I will show you..." And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed. So Abram departed, as the LORD had spoken unto him...." Abram (later Abraham) and his wife, Sarai (also called Sarah), left what they knew and went where they were led. They let the promise God made to them make a difference in every aspect of their living.

Personally, it's hard to imagine how they could do it, not knowing where God was going to lead them. I tend to be a "control freak." So if God had appeared to me and suggested that we make a big move, I would want a map, GPS, details, and all kinds of reassurances... I would be too full of fear of the unknown to fully trust God. Fear can keep us from trusting God... How many of us have failed to reach out to someone else or do something that we believe God is nudging us to do because of fear and uncertainty? I doubt that I am the only one.

Just because Abraham did trust God enough to journey away from his home does not mean that he didn't struggle with fear, however. Early in his journey, he became so afraid that the people of Egypt would kill him because of the great beauty of his wife, Sarah, that he lied and said his wife was his sister.

Later, Abraham was afraid that he would never have a child with his Sarah in spite of God's promises that he would (understandable because twenty years passed with no child for the elderly couple!), so he impregnated his wife's servant. Along the way, however, through various crises, Abraham learned that God is faithful to God's promises.

In today's Gospel lesson, Nicodemus approached Jesus after dark. His first statement laid out his terms to Jesus: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that you do, except God be with him." And Jesus met his statement with something Nicodemus wouldn't have expected: "I tell you, unless a man is born again, from above, he cannot see the kingdom of heaven."

Thomas G. Long, theologian/preacher/writer, offered an interesting perspective on Nicodemus and his conversation with Jesus: "Two world-views collide in the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus. Nicodemus represents the arrogant, orderly part of us and our world, coolly confident about human knowledge and cynically sure of what is possible and impossible. Jesus, on the other hand, enfleshes the unpredictable reality of God and the wild and free breezes of the Spirit. Nicodemus is like so many of us who come to religion seeking prepared answers to our fill-in-the-blank questions, only to find Jesus challenging our pat questions and taking us off the edges of our maps and into unexplored regions of the mystery of grace more wonderful than we could have ever dreamed." (*Pulpit Resource*, 2/28/99)

We tend to yell up to God: "Answer MY questions, fill in MY blanks for me!" God lets us know that God's ways are not our ways...The wind blows where it will... God has chosen to love this

world, and even us... God has promised to be with us, even to the end of time. (*Matthew 28*)

As I write this, my attention has been fixated on the mystery of the missing airliner, Malaysia Air Flight 370. We are all shaken to realize that in spite of the communications technology and satellites and built-in safeguards in commercial aircraft today, somehow this airplane and its passengers have disappeared and not been found for over a week. Our imaginations run wild as we think of the turmoil the relatives of those on that plane are enduring. How would I handle it were one of my children on the plane, I wonder. It all comes down to God; we are all held in God's great and caring oversight, in those everlasting arms that extend beyond shootings and hijackings and natural and man-made disasters and gas leaks and automobile accidents and catastrophic illnesses; finally, we must decide whether or not to trust God. (pause)

I share an illustration I heard years ago: A woman named Jeanette Strong wrote about trusting God: "When my son was a toddler, washing his hair was always a problem. He would sit in the bathtub while I put shampoo - this was before tearless shampoos came out - on his head. When I poured on the water to make a lather, he would tip his head down so that the shampoo ran into his eyes, causing pain and tears. I explained that if he would just look straight up at me, the soap would run back and wouldn't get in his face. He would agree, but then, as soon as I started pouring water near his face to rinse his hair, his fear would overcome his trust, and he would look down again. And the shampoo would burn his eyes again, and there would be more tears.

"During one of our sessions, while I was trying to convince him to lift up his head and trust me, I suddenly realized how this situation was like my relationship to God. I am sure that God loves me, and I believe that I trust God. But sometimes, in a difficult situation, I panic and turn my eyes away from God. This never solves the problem; I just become more afraid, as life's 'shampoo' blinds me. ..." Illustrations Unlimited

The "shampoo" and fears of life blind us to God's work, and warn us that it must not be so, that it surely cannot be possible that God is really with me and even loves me? But the Bible gives us the reason it is true: God so loved and continues to love the world; our world, and even us. That's the basis and truth of LIFE. Our challenge is to believe it, and then to live it out for others.

The Good News doesn't say that storms won't come or that we will not have to endure hardships. Storms will come, relationships will hurt, our bodies will become ill or wear out... People will commit crimes, even horrible ones, children will get lost, and the economy will most likely have opportunity to frighten us all. Life will offer many good reasons for us to have fear and to have doubts about God's love for us. But no matter who we are, regardless the good or bad we have done, whatever our worst fears and our best hopes, we're given a promise which is offered to us as God's WORD: in all things and every place God is with us. This fact cannot be washed away or blown away or eroded over time.

In his book, *Listening to Your Life*, Frederick Beuchner, whose daughter suffered from anorexia nervosa, wrote an excerpt entitled: "Trust," December 17th. This is what he wrote:

"I remember sitting parked by the roadside once, terribly depressed and afraid of my daughter's

illness and what was going on in our family, when out of nowhere a car came along down the highway with a license plate that bore the one word out of all the words in the dictionary that I most needed to see exactly then. It was the word TRUST. What do you call a moment like that? Something to laugh off as the kind of joke life plays on us every once in a while? The word of God? I am willing to believe that maybe it was something of both, but for me that day it was an epiphany. TRUST.

“The owner of the car turned out to be, as I’d suspected, a trust officer in a bank, and not long ago, having read an account I wrote of the incident somewhere, he found out where I lived and one afternoon brought me the license plate itself, which now sits propped up on a bookshelf in my house. It is rusty around the edges and a little battered, and it is also as holy a relic as I have ever seen.” (pp. 326-327)

Trust. Trust God, the God who has chosen to work in human lives in unexpected, perhaps even seemingly impossible, ways. Nicodemus couldn’t grasp how a person could enter the womb to be born a second time; probably most of the time *we* cannot grasp how God can bring forth something good out of whatever is stressing or threatening to defeat our lives today.

Things looked impossible for Abraham and Sarah when God called the childless elderly couple to pull up stakes and move to new territory, and really impossible when twenty years later they STILL had no child to begin the “great multitude” God had promised to make of them....

Things seemed impossible for Nicodemus, who had all his earthly understandings lined up and explainable, but who could not understand when Jesus talked beyond his limits.

We have a choice with our own lives, as we experience this world so filled with tensions and problems, and as we deal with our own limited lives and often unlimited fears. We can decide, as Nicodemus apparently did that night talking with Jesus, that it is impossible that God could really love us and impossible for us to ever really trust God. Or, we can be more like Abraham, and step out even when we don’t understand where we’re being called to go or even what it is God really needs us to do.... We’ll find out along the way. Nicodemus, where everything has to “make sense,” or Abraham, where it all boils down to trusting God?

The “shampoos” and fears of life, the discouragements and complexities, often blind us to God’s presence in our lives, and too often convince us that God cannot be our attentive keeper, the Guardian of our coming in and going out. But the Bible would tell us that it IS true, true because God loves us, even though we haven’t earned love and don’t deserve it. And true because that’s what God does: God so loved the world.... Our challenge is to trust this, to let the promise God has offered us in Jesus make a difference in our lives. Believe it, trust it, risk living as if it is true, and then watch how God will pour the proof of God’s faithful, never-ending love through our lives for others. May each of us live a trust-walk; by the grace of God, our feeble attempts to do so will make all the difference in the world. Thank God!