

01 March 2026 LENT 2

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THE JOURNEY OF TRUST

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

All of our readings today remind us that the Christian life is a journey of trust.

Our ancestor in the faith, Abraham - or Abram - as he was known, and wife Sarai, are called to leave the security of their familiar home in Ur of the Chaldees to travel to a strange new land where they will be unknown. They are childless, and not young, but God promises that they will be blessed with innumerable descendants.

In her senior years, Sarai laughs at the prospect. Their nephew Lot tags along with them – because he is their only heir and the only hope for the survival of the line of Abram.

In Jewish thinking, having descendants was your guarantee of immortality. You lived forever through your descendants. Abram jumped for joy when God promised him an untold number of descendants.

That same concept of immortality through the continuance of your genes, is shared by many cultures including Maori and Pacific Cultures. That is one reason why keeping your Whakapapa or family tree, is so important. It represents your immortality!

Being called to leave the security of the known, to venture out on a journey of faith is a known reality for many of us in this church today.

We have members from South Africa, Zimbabwe, England, Indonesia, Holland, the Philippines, and people like myself, who have left some other place in Aotearoa NZ, to come and live in Havelock North.

We know what it is to leave home, to find a new home. And that seems to be the pattern of the faith journey - we leave home in order to find home.

It's the story of the Exodus – leaving home to find home.

Young people born in Havelock North must leave home to go to university . Or leave home to find work overseas or in other parts of the country, because they can't find work in a small community like Havelock North . They must leave home to find a new home.

Each of us is still on the faith journey. We don't know where it will end. But we trust that the God of Abraham and Sarah. The God of Jesus and the disciples, the God of St Columba will be with us to the end.

Our second reading from St Paul's Letter to the early Roman Church contains the statements that later became the pillars of the Protestant Reformation – and still remain at the heart of the Protestant Faith.

'Sola fide' 'sola gratia' we are saved by faith alone and by grace alone and not by our own works.

We are justified before God simply by trusting the One who loves us and forgives our sins. Like a helpless newborn baby, we don't have to do any work to make God love us! We are loved and cherished already. We just must trust that love.

Paul and the early Christians have left us with the idea that Jews thought that they could earn God's love by following a set of rules - or that the Jews took it for granted that being a descendant of Abraham was their claim to God's love.

The early Protestants Reformers made the same accusation of Roman Catholics – that they thought they could earn God's favour by following a set of rules set down by the church magisterium. Or pay their way to God through Indulgences.

That may have been true at the time of the Reformation 500 years ago – but is not true today. The Catholic Church went through its own reformation (Council of Trent 1645) and has continued with reforms right into the 20th century (Vatican II).

I thought it important to mention these things because all Christians need to work together and realize that in Christ we are one church.

It's always sad and unfortunate when any particular church believes that it is the true church and that the rest of us are only make-believe churches or somehow not the genuine article. That attitude represents a kind of modern day pharisaism.

The true church is the one that brings us to Christ and keeps us loyal to Him.

Our gospel lesson today, is the well-known story of Nicodemus – the night caller.

The story of Nicodemus reminded me of nights when I have stayed awake seeking for answers from God.

Nighttime for many people is a time for seeking for answers to life's big and small questions. A time when we are most pensive.

David writes in one of his beautiful Psalms (Ps 63: 6)

'I think of you on my bed and meditate on you in the watches of the night; for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.'

Maybe you've lain on your bed at night seeking for answers to difficult questions. Or like, David, lain awake, thankful for the peace and joy you have experienced.

Maybe your prayer is just seeking for a good night's sleep.

Nighttime is that special time when nothing more can be done, that hasn't been done. The day is done. All that is left for us is to sleep.

Nicodemus came to see Jesus at night. Maybe he couldn't sleep and wanted answers to questions he believed Jesus could answer.

Maybe he came to see Jesus by night because he didn't want to be seen.

Nicodemus had a lot to lose. He was a Pharisee and a leader in the Jewish community. He had a reputation to protect – he was known as a wise keeper of the Jewish tradition. People relied on him to be true to the Jewish faith.

But he didn't know what to make of Jesus. We can tell by his conversation that he believed Jesus was a genuine prophetic teacher, but what more he could learn about the charismatic young Rabbi?

He began the conversation, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God'.

And Jesus tells him something that is strange to his orthodox Jewish ears: 'You must be born again (or born from above), if you want to see the Kingdom of God'.

Nicodemus was thrown off guard by the term 'born again' and its meaning.

In the 60s and 70's we used to hear the term 'born again' quite often. There were 'Christians' and 'born again' Christians – 'born again' usually meant they had experienced a dramatic conversion, or answered an altar call at an evangelical church or meeting.

It was an uncomfortable term for some of us because it drew a line between faithful Christians, as if there were first-class and second-class Christians.

I think most Christians at the time could agree that being 'born again' meant, laying aside your self-sufficiency and trusting God to guide you through life's journey.

Being 'born again' meant being prepared to become like a child to humbly learn what it means to follow Jesus. Being born again meant, inviting the Holy Spirit to live in you and be your teacher. It meant, listening for the voice of the Spirit.

Like our spiritual ancestor Abraham, we were blessed, not so that we could be incredibly happy for the rest of our lives. We were blessed so that we could become a blessing to the world, or to others. The focus was never to be on us – or even on the church. It was to be a blessing to the world - an outward focus. That is how we should still be as a church.

Towards the end of our gospel reading today, we heard one of the most well-known and most meaningful verses in the whole Bible:

John 3: 6 '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'.

That is what the church should be about – the love of God, for the world and reflecting the love of God to the world around us.

How we do that is a question we must keep asking ourselves.

I'd like to finish by sharing a story from one of my favourite theologians - the late Paul Tillich. He used the story in one of his sermons, to illustrate grace and the faith journey. (The New Being, 1955).

He told the story of a horse rider who travelled all night across a vast plain on a dark winter's night.

In the darkness, all he could see were the lights of a town faraway in distance. He rode his horse all night across the huge plain guided only by that light.

As the sun began its slow rise, revealing the countryside around him, he looked back to where he had come from and realized that he had just ridden all night across a frozen lake.

I don't know what that illustration does for you, but it certainly speaks to me about the goodness of life and the grace that we often take for granted.

Life is full of great moments that we can only put down to the grace of God - especially as we try to follow the light of the gospel...