

Genesis 12

12 The Lord said to Abram, "Leave your land, your family, and your father's household for the land that I will show you. 2 I will make of you a great nation and will bless you. I will make your name respected, and you will be a blessing.

3 I will bless those who bless you,
those who curse you I will curse;
all the families of the earth
will be blessed because of you." [a]

4 Abram left just as the Lord told him, and Lot went with him.

Psalms 121

121 I raise my eyes toward the mountains.

Where will my help come from?

2 My help comes from the Lord,
the maker of heaven and earth.

3 God won't let your foot slip.
Your protector won't fall asleep on the job.

4 No! Israel's protector
never sleeps or rests!

5 The Lord is your protector;
the Lord is your shade right beside you.

6 The sun won't strike you during the day;
neither will the moon at night.

7 The Lord will protect you from all evil;
God will protect your very life. [a]

8 The Lord will protect you on your journeys—
whether going or coming—
from now until forever from now.

Romans 4

4 So what are we going to say? Are we going to find that Abraham is our ancestor on the basis of genealogy? 2 Because if Abraham was made righteous because of his actions, he would have had a reason to brag, but not in front of God. 3 What does the scripture say? Abraham had faith in God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. [a] 4 Workers' salaries aren't credited to them on the basis of an employer's grace but rather on the basis of what they deserve. 5 But faith is credited as righteousness to those who don't work, because they have faith in God who makes the ungodly righteous.

13 The promise to Abraham and to his descendants, that he would inherit the world, didn't come through the Law but through the righteousness that comes from faith. 14 If they inherit because of the Law, then faith has no effect and the promise has been canceled. 15 The Law brings about wrath. But when there isn't any law, there isn't any violation of the law. 16 That's why the inheritance comes through faith, so that it will be on the basis of God's grace. In that way, the

promise is secure for all of Abraham's descendants, not just for those who are related by Law but also for those who are related by the faith of Abraham, who is the father of all of us. 17 As it is written: I have appointed you to be the father of many nations.[c] So Abraham is our father in the eyes of God in whom he had faith, the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that don't exist into existence.

John 3

3 There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a Jewish leader. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him."

3 Jesus answered, "I assure you, unless someone is born anew,[a] it's not possible to see God's kingdom."

4 Nicodemus asked, "How is it possible for an adult to be born? It's impossible to enter the mother's womb for a second time and be born, isn't it?"

5 Jesus answered, "I assure you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, it's not possible to enter God's kingdom. 6 Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Don't be surprised that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.' 8 God's Spirit[b] blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. It's the same with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

9 Nicodemus said, "How are these things possible?"

10 "Jesus answered, "You are a teacher of Israel and you don't know these things? 11 I assure you that we speak about what we know and testify about what we have seen, but you don't receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you about earthly things and you don't believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13 No one has gone up to heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Human One.[c] 14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One[d] be lifted up 15 so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. 16 God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life. 17 God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him. 18 Whoever believes in him isn't judged; whoever doesn't believe in him is already judged, because they don't believe in the name of God's only Son.

Sermon

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer:

Amen.

Now into the second week of our Lenten devotional, we're assuming something, namely, that we know the stories that we're going to tell. Now, of course it's true that we all need to know God's story better than we do, and it's also true that we need to better understand our own stories. That kind of Christian education and self awareness is a life's work. It takes a lifetime to learn God's story and to understand how our story is a part of God's story. But we can't wait until the end of life to take the next step as spiritual storytellers, because other people need to hear God's story! We have a good gift to share in the story of God, which is the story of love and life. So today we move to a different question. How do we

make connections with others as we share our story? How do we find the space where our stories fit together?

First, an example of how not to do this. As my sister Karen continues to face cancer, and to do so brilliantly, by the way, many people attempt to make connections with her, to offer her and the family support, to come alongside her as she battles this rogue growth within her body. However, some people have tried to reach out with comments like, “Oh yeah, colon cancer. My dear friend battled colon cancer for four years before they died. If you ever want to talk through that, I'm here for you.” Let me tell you that this is one of those times when it's incredibly difficult to remain pastoral as a pastor.

Some people are just tactless, reckless and thoughtless as they try to make connections with other people. If I, as someone who loves a cancer patient, can give you any advice on how to connect with people in these situations, it's this: never lead with the

stories of those who died. Stories about remission are always a better option, and if you don't have one of those, a simple “I'm sorry, I'm inspired by how you're fighting, and I'm here for you,” would be an exponentially better option. In other words, if your story doesn't have room for that person's abundant life, for their deliverance or purpose or hope, then it's not a spiritual story. It's not God's story, for our God has a voracious appetite for life and for sharing that life.

Now, none of this means that the stories are simple or easy to understand. Clearly, Jesus's story confuses Nicodemus almost immediately, but that's because he speaks with an imagination beyond Nicodemus's wildest dreams. Nicodemus hears this talk of being born again, and hears the impossible! Hence his incredulous response. But where Nicodemus sees the impossible, Jesus's imagination points to the possibilities created by God's story. We, like Jesus, have to tell stories with God's imagination. Imagine that

we can be born anew, born from above, imagine that we might receive a life beyond the life we received from our biological parents. And imagine that we might share that story. That's the kind of imagination it takes for a Pharisee, one of those most endangered by Jesus's message that subverts the power of the establishment, to come to the Lord anyway with hope for deliverance. The power of a faithful imagination is this: it creates the space for doubters to become believers, for skeptics to embrace the spirituality of God's story. Imagination is reproductive. It breeds imagination in others.

So we, then, to tell spiritual stories that are compelling to others, we must tell our stories with God's imagination. And make no mistake. We should be telling compelling stories. The Bible isn't a boring book, nor is it safe, though we've attempted to tame it throughout the centuries. There's stories of wars won with trumpets, of passionate love, of discovering new lands, of reuniting long lost

friends, of prison breaks and talking fires and talking donkeys and God talking even in the silence, and in each of these stories, God is finding a place for our story to become a part of God's story. God's imagination makes space for our stories to intertwine with others' stories. That's because God imagines a world where all things are reconciled through Jesus Christ. Jesus tells a story big enough for Nicodemus to enter where Nicodemus can be fully himself, fully alive. How do we tell stories like that?

We don't just tell the same old story, but instead, we fit our story to the people we're with. For instance, I hear a lot of people make a big deal about team sports and about the life lessons people learn from team sports. But not everyone likes every sport, nor is everyone able to participate in the demanding physical activity associated with sports. Does this mean their story can't fit with the lesson of teamwork? **Of course not.** There's myriad other ways to learn how to work on a team. Teams play all sorts of other

games, from golf to chess. Teams work on projects at school and work. Teams go on scavenger hunts and teams work to cleanup and care for our environment. You can tell the story of teamwork without typical team sports involved. You just have to imagine a story big enough to fit other people.

We also speak to their needs with compassion. Like Jesus does with Nicodemus, we welcome conversations that aren't about us, and we answer questions that we're asked. Even Jesus's first words are a direct response to Nicodemus's overture. "You think that I'm from God? Well that's available to everyone, but they must be born anew." Jesus sees Nicodemus's heart and speaks to his deepest needs with compassion. And the questions Nicodemus asks, rather than threats, provide Jesus with the opportunity to know Nicodemus's story and connect with him more authentically.

At the same time, Jesus isn't afraid of his story, so he makes God the subject of the story's verbs. The story is about what God's

doing and how we're excited to be a part of it, not about how much credit we deserve and just tacking on "Jesus" to the end of our sentences. As we tell our spiritual stories, must make sure that God is the subject of our verbs. In other words, even though they're our stories, we're not the main characters. We're the supporting cast in the creative narrative of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection, so the stories we tell ought to reflect God's primacy in that work.

Finally, we must remember that the story's purpose is to grow. Our story, the story of God, is a procreative kind of story, in that it's meant to give birth to bigger stories that include its DNA but expand to embrace all who hear it. In other words, when we tell spiritual stories we must tell them in a way that specifically invites someone to join their story with God's story. Jesus makes clear that there's an opportunity for his story to weave with Nicodemus's story. God's story always makes space for our stories, so as we

share our stories, we've got to make space for others stories as well.

So, much like last week, we're going to have an opportunity to practice. We're going to take a few moments to write down one story in your life where you've seen God active. Just write one sentence so you know what you're talking about. Then, write your name on it, and we're going to put them in the offering plate. We're going to offer our stories to God, so we can imagine God as the main character, God as the one brought our story into God's story, and who therefore wants us to bring others stories into God's story as well. To conclude, before we take a few moments in silence to write and reflect, let me give you an example of what that might look like.

SoISup, short of Solidarity Suppers, has become our new initiative based in education, conversation, and action for issue based social justice. Friday night at our most recent SoISup, we had

a great visit from Molly McIntock, a member of the Blacksburg Refugee Partnership. She told us of three families they've resettled to the area and two more who are on their way, families who are wonderful images of a God and who need the church's help to thrive. God's already at work, for two of the families found employment within weeks and are already hard at work, and because the Blacksburg Refugee Partnership has received a grant to help single parent resettlement families who will be coming soon. God was also already at work through us, for on Friday night this group of people from within and outside our church raised \$600 that night to help support these people, as well as raised up volunteers for tutoring, for driving them to work until they get drivers licenses, and even someone to help provide mental health training. It's exciting to be a part of something that's so clearly bringing God's compassion and life-giving witness to people. Even with all that activity, we're still in need of support for these families

and for others who are still seeking resettlement. Do you have any gifts, skills, or passions that you think can help these people thrive in the NRV? We'd love if you shared them with these families, and I can put you in touch with volunteers coordinators right away.

We're all capable of telling stories like that, stories of things that we care about because we see the fruit of God's spirit there, and stories that we want other people to be a part of, because the joy within them is contagious. We've just got to find the spaces where our stories fit together.