

## SCRIPTURE READING FOR MARCH 5, 2023 @ CAPC OAKLAND

### LANGUAGE NOTES & TEXTUAL CONNECTIONS

Genesis is the first book of the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Bible. It tells of the creation of the world and the vocation of Abraham, Sarah and their family to point to the nature of God through their relationship. The two stories are pivotal in the larger story, indicating that God creates the world through physical “creation” as well as relationship – both done with God speaking, addressing a word to a conversation partner: “When God began to create the heavens and the earth, <sup>2</sup> the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. <sup>3</sup> **Then God said, “Let there be light,”** and there was light.” Genesis 1:1-3 AND “Now **the Lord said to Abram,** “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” - Genesis 12:1

**BLESS::** in Hebrew) the word בָּרַךְ pronounced *barak* means to kneel (down - as you would do to receive a gift), to bless.

John is the fourth of the four gospels in the Second Testament. The gospels are the telling of the story of the life of Jesus of Nazareth and his teachings. John is most likely the last of the four to be written down. This is understood from its more developed theological content, heavy use of metaphors, and difference in which stories it preserves compared to the other three gospels. All of this is seen in our selection today, which is only told by John.

**Pharisee::** Remember that at the time of Jesus there were several majors sects, or branches of Judaism. The Pharisees were a Jewish religious party that flourished in Palestine during the latter part of the Second Temple period (515 BCE–70 CE). The Pharisees’ insistence on the binding force of oral tradition (“the unwritten Torah”) remains a basic tenet of Jewish theological thought. When the Mishna (the first constituent part of the Talmud) was compiled about 200 CE, it incorporated the teachings of the Pharisees on Jewish law. They were quite possibly the closest to the teachings of Jesus (as compared to the Scribes, and the Sadducees [the elite leaders of the Temple]). That’s why scholars conclude Jesus pushes them in particular in the gospels, to get them to open their eyes just a bit more. Nicodemus appears three times in John’s gospel – here. The second mention of Nicodemus occurs when some of the chief priests and Pharisees of the Sanhedrin ask why the temple guards failed to bring Jesus to them. Nicodemus speaks in subtle defense of Jesus, saying that Jewish law requires that a person cannot be condemned without first being heard (John 7:50–51). The third time is after Jesus’ crucifixion, Nicodemus assists Joseph of Arimathea in laying Jesus’ body in a nearby tomb (John 19:39–42).

**by night::** throughout the gospel of John there is a heavily repeated theme of light/darkness; daytime/nighttime. The light/daytime is the time that God is at work in the world, the dark/night-time is the opposite. Here Nicodemus may be coming at night to hide himself and avoid being seen by his colleagues; and/or it is a repetition of

### Genesis 12:1-4a NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION

<sup>1</sup> Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup> I will make of you a great nation, and I will **BLESS** you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

<sup>4</sup> So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

### John 3:1-17 NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION

<sup>1</sup> Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup> He came to Jesus *by night* and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person.” <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being **born from above.**” <sup>4</sup> Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup> What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.” <sup>7</sup> Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be **born from above.**’ <sup>8</sup> The *wind* blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” <sup>9</sup> Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” <sup>10</sup> Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

<sup>11</sup> “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen,

yet you do not receive our testimony. <sup>12</sup> If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

<sup>14</sup> And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have ETERNAL LIFE.

<sup>16</sup> "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.

<sup>17</sup> "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.

#### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION & EXAMEN:

- What engaged you, enraged you, or surprised you in these texts?
- In John 3:2, Nicodemus initially greets Jesus with a statement: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God." We might wonder : "Who is the 'we' he refers to? The other Jewish leaders, or some other group? Did Nicodemus come by his own will, or was he sent? Was this some sort of private investigation to test Jesus? What was his initial reason for going to Jesus?" If you were to fill in these details of the story, what do you imagine? What is Nicodemus' backstory? Do you see any of your own story in Nicodemus?

#### LANGUAGE NOTES & TEXTUAL CONNECTIONS

...the metaphorical theme of light and dark in John's telling of the Jesus story.

**born from above**:: in Greek it reads "γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν" *prounced* anōthen (adverb) means several things – hence the possibility that a pun, or paly on words, is intended in the text::

1. from above, from a higher place; Matthew 27:51
2. from the first: Luke 1:3; then, from the beginning on, from the very first:
3. anew, over again, indicating repetition; John 3:3, 7; Galatians 4:9

Verses 5 & 6 "Very truly, I tell you, :: echo the beginning of the gospel when it speaks about flesh, spirit and God appearing in the world: "<sup>1</sup> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ...<sup>10</sup> He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him. <sup>11</sup> He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. <sup>12</sup> But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, <sup>13</sup> who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. <sup>14</sup> And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." John 1:1, 10-14.

This idea of spirit born of spirit and new beginnings is also sprinkled throughout the Hebrew scriptures: see Ezekiel 36:23-31a for example: "<sup>23</sup> I [GOD] will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations and which you have profaned among them, and the nations shall know that I am the Lord, says the Lord God, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes. <sup>24</sup> I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. <sup>25</sup> I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. <sup>26</sup> A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> I will put my spirit within you and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. <sup>28</sup> Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. <sup>29</sup> I will save you from all your uncleannesses, and I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you. <sup>30</sup> I will make the fruit of the tree and the produce of the field abundant, so that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations. <sup>31</sup> Then you shall remember.."

**Wind. Spirit** :: In both Hebrew רוּחַ pronounced *rûach* and Greek πνεῦμα pronounced *pneuma* both of the words mean properly, spirit (Spirit), wind, or breath. The most frequent meaning (translation) of (pneúma) in the NT is "spirit" ("Spirit"). Only the context however determines which sense(s) is meant. Pneuma is connected etymologically with πνέω, to breathe or blow, and has a basic meaning of 'air in motion', or 'breath' as something necessary to life. In Greek tragedy it is used of the 'breath of life' and it is the 'Spirit' of the New Testament.

LANGUAGE NOTES & TEXTUAL CONNECTIONS

- We may not know much about Nicodemus' backstory, or what prompted him to visit Jesus in the night, but we do know that he ultimately accompanies Joseph of Arimathea, a secret disciple of Jesus, to tend to Jesus' body after his death (John 19:38-42). Together, they carefully anoint his body in myrrh and aloe, wrap him in linens, and lay him in the tomb. Considering these later details in the narrative, how do you imagine Nicodemus was changed by his interaction with Jesus in the night? Was he born anew? Did he begin again?
- In his book, *What is the Bible?* author Rob Bell emphasizes that God's blessing to Abram—to lead a new nation through which all the earth will be blessed—is a new and radical idea in a culture in which tribal identity and preservation were brutally protected. Abraham's tribe, also known as Israel, exists not just for its own purpose, but for the purpose of blessing others. When does a new beginning invite you to be a blessing to others?
- As you think through these two narratives: being born again and being promised an expansive future, ask yourself, "Do I believe in the possibility of new beginnings?" And, when the opportunities are revealed before you, "Will I be willing to step into the promise of what may be?"
- What invitation do you hear the Spirit of God speaking to you – or to us, as a church – to act, speak, be or change through this word of scripture?

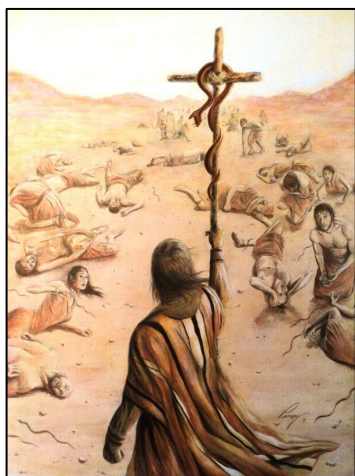
And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness :: This refers back to the story told in Numbers 21:3-7 :: "3The Lord listened to the voice of Israel and handed over the Canaanites, and they utterly destroyed them and their towns; so the place was called Hormah. 4 From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom, but the people became discouraged on the way. 5 The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." 6 Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. 7 The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. 8 And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." 9 So Moses made a serpent of bronze and put it upon a pole, and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live."

ETERNAL:: αἰώνιος pronounced αἰόνιος means both:

1) AGE LONG, ETERNAL - (the quality describing a particular age); (figuratively) the unique quality (reality) of God's life at work in the believer). ETERNAL (αἰόνιος) life operates simultaneously outside of time, inside of time, and beyond time – i.e. what gives time its everlasting meaning for the believer through faith, yet is also time-independent

2) αἰόνιος life - focuses on the quality of life lived - A GOOD, RICH, WELL-LIVED, OR ABUNDANT LIFE. It does not focus on the future per se, but rather on the quality of the age (165 /aión) it relates to. Thus believers live in "ETERNAL (αἰόνιος) life" right now, experiencing this quality of God's life now as a present possession. (Note the Greek present tense of having eternal life in Jn 3:36, 5:24, 6:47; cf. Ro 6:23.)).

Does it change things to image eternal life as maybe more about living fully – richly – abundantly - God-like – now; as opposed to living forever? Is there a difference?



A representation of Moses with the serpent on a stick as told in Numbers 21

John seems to be making a comparison between the serpent on the stick and the cross as signs to which we can look for God's salvation – saving, delivering, presence and action in our lives and world.

