

FRESH PROMISES

Order of Service (bulletin)

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Video (recorded live stream)

<https://www.youtube.com/@spiritofhopeunitedchurch791>

March 1, 2026

Lent 2

Genesis 12:1-4a

[Adonai] said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people, and the home of your parents, and go to a place I will show you. I will make you a great people. I will bless you and make your name so great that it will be used in blessings. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse those who curse you. And all the people on the face of the earth will be blessed through you.” Abram, who was 75 years old when he left Haran, began the journey as [Adonai] had instructed, and his nephew Lot went with them and set out for Canaan.

John 3:1-17

A certain Pharisee named Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin, came to Jesus at night. “Rabbi,” he said, “we know you’re a teacher come from God, for no one can perform the signs and wonders you do, unless by the power of God.” Jesus gave Nicodemus this answer: “The truth of the matter is, unless one is born from above, one cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said, “How can an adult be born a second time? I can’t fit back into my mother’s womb to be born again!” Jesus replied: “The truth of the matter is, no one can enter God’s kingdom without being born of water and the Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh; what is born of the Spirit is Spirit. So don’t be surprised when I tell you that you must be born from above. The wind blows where it will. You hear the sound it makes, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it goes. So, it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” “How can this be possible?” asked Nicodemus. Jesus replied, “You’re a teacher of Israel, and you still don’t understand these matters? “The truth of the matter is, we’re talking about what we know; we’re testifying about what we’ve seen – yet you don’t accept our testimony. If you don’t believe when I tell you about earthly things, how will you believe when I tell you about heavenly things? No one has gone up to heaven except the One who came down from heaven – the Chosen One. As Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so the Chosen One must be lifted up so that everyone who believes in the Chosen One might have eternal life. Yes, God so loved the world as to give the Only Begotten One, that whoever believes may not die, but have eternal life. God sent the Only Begotten into the world not to condemn the world, but that through the Only Begotten the world might be saved.



Churches, like many of us individually, seem to enjoy predictable patterns. Oh, have you noticed that? And for good reason. You know, the familiar is calming. It's reassuring.

Rev. T. Blaine Gregg

Have you ever found yourself, and this happened to me just this last week, hearing a song you maybe haven't heard in quite a while, and you're able to sing along with pretty much every word. It's not a song that maybe you've ever seen in print. You've only heard it and it's been a while and you're able to remember the whole song. Taken back in time. You know, most days I can't find either my phone or my car keys, but I seem to be able to remember pretty much every word of Lyin Eyes by the Eagles. You listen to it over and over again at some point in your life back in the day and it leaves its mark. Literally, neurologically, it leaves its mark.

Some churches religiously follow virtually the same pattern for their worship services every week. Some churches even publish prayer books and have them in the seats where people are so that people can turn to the pre-designed liturgy where everyone can literally be on the same page. And I remember someone saying when I was in theological college that the United Church is not a prayer book church. We would compare ourselves to our Anglican classmates and then we had to admit, no, we may not have published a prayer book, but we follow a pattern. Trust me, our prayer book is simply reprinted every week and we call it the bulletin. All churches, even the most spontaneous of communities of faith of whatever expression of Christianity there is, has a familiar pattern that they've developed and follow. I've always appreciated the tongue-in-cheek axiom that was shared by my seminary worship professor who said, "If you do something once in a church, it becomes a tradition. If you do it twice, it becomes an unchangeable tradition." And those of us who have been around church circles for a while know what it is to change things up. It just takes us out of that comfort zone. And maybe that's the intent. But when we're not in our familiar pattern, that sense of calm and reassurance isn't as automatic. We settle into our patterns for good reason. We do that for our behaviors and it's also true with the way we think. We develop ideals and we develop ethics and they last for us. And maybe it's been a process to get those where we want them to be to have my set of beliefs set. And we hang on to that because they become important to us. They become the guides which help us make decisions as life moves through. But... sometimes, either intentionally or not, opportunities are going to arise to help us understand and to behave differently.

According to the book of Genesis, Terah lived in the town of Ur on the banks of the Euphrates River just a bit before where it joins with the Tigris where they flow together into the Persian Gulf. Tarah is said to have had three male children, three sons, Haran, Nahor, and Abram. We're also told fairly early on in Terah's story that Nahar, his son, had a son named Lot. Sadly, Heron passes away and it appears that Abram and his spouse Sarai look after Lot as aunt and uncle and raise him.

At some point, and we're not told why, Terah seems to have made the decision to relocate his family to the land of Canaan. quite a ways away from the mouth of the Euphrates River (modern Iraq) to Canaan, (modern Israel). And they must have planned to follow the rivers, the river courses, because that's where the settlements were along what is known as the fertile crescent. So they go up the Euphrates, and then they would go down the various water courses and lakes that led to the Jordan River. Now, we can presume this route not only because it makes sense logically, but also because about halfway there, about halfway on the trip from Ur to Canaan, they stop and they settle in a town called Haran. A town with the same name as Terah's deceased son. But that's likely a coincidence. The names come from different languages. Along on this move, Tarah takes his son Abram, his grandson Lot, and his daughter-in-law Sarai. We have to assume that Nahor and his family didn't make the trip. Now, we don't know why the plans for this journey to go from Ur to Canaan got interrupted when they got to Haran. The Bible is silent on why they stopped there. Maybe it's the coincidental sounding name of Terah's son that made him feel like this was a place he wanted to be. Maybe it made it hard for that old patriarch to leave Haran... again. Sometimes I like to imagine that. But the Bible is silent as to why this planned trip to Canaan stopped in Haran.

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It was adjusted for some unwritten reason. We picked up the story today in Genesis 12. Sometime after Terah dies in Haran after living a long life, God, who does not seem to have had any direct influence on Terah to begin this journey, now inspires Terah's son Abram to leave their new home in Haran and head to Canaan. In our reading today, at first we hear God speak ambiguously about their destination. *Leave your country and go to a place where I will show you.* It doesn't say I'm sending you to Canaan. It just says just move. Start walking - maybe in this direction. Abram seems to have been invited to leave and having to trust that the final destination would emerge eventually. Now, if we don't like messing around with the order of the church service here, can you imagine having to trust that kind of change? Trust indeed. I mean, Abram is a spry 75-year-old at the time. Now, the author of Genesis knows the whole story and actually foreshadows God's plan in the final verse that we heard today, but it's not something that we hear God tell Abram. The final verse, which the audience of the book can read, is that *Abram, Sarai, and Lot were setting out for Canaan.* We know where they're going, but they don't. In a way, this new plan of God was really just Terah's old plan because the family had set out from Ur the land of the Chaldeans and they would eventually wind up in Hebron in the land of the Canaanites. It took a long while and it had a pit stop in the middle for many years, but they got where they intended to be.

Even though the original plan eventually came to be, I imagined that that second start, having done the resettlement once and the travel once, that second start, like the first one, was going to require a complete reorientation of the familiar patterns and an appreciation that we're not going to know the comforts of home for a while.

I can't imagine a more unsettling thing: to abandon a settled life for an uncertain one in a strange land and to be nomadic for a good part of that. Maybe that's why it it seems to rub me the wrong way when modern folk who've endured these patterns, who have endured the unknown and hard journeys to new lands that hoped would be for them welcoming and safe are then scapegoated, even vilified, by the long-term settlers: blamed for any society's changes they're having to go through. I mean, I know we don't like change, but we say, "It's not my change I have to deal with. It's somebody else's fault." And I look at the story of Abram and Terah before Abram and say, "Such a difficult journey to go to a new place where you hope it will be a good life for you." And how horrible it is to get there and say, "Well, you're just not welcome." I saw a social media post this past week and I wasn't able to find an original source for it, but uh this social media person was saying that Jon Cornish, who you may remember is a former Calgary Stampeder star running back and the current chancellor of the University of Calgary, was recently confronted on the streets of Calgary and told to go back where he came from. Jon Cornish, whose skin is dark, was born in New Westminster, British Columbia. Imagine what it must be like for those who've come to this place from a part of the world seeking refuge and hope. Jon Cornish experienced a taste of that having been born in Canada. Enough about that for now.

Nicodemus. Nicodemus appears to have wondered if he belonged with Jesus and he wondered how he felt about Jesus' involvement in Galilee and in Jerusalem. It seems likely that Nicodemus felt unworthy whether he'd be judged negatively being seen with such an unorthodox rabbi. The book of John doesn't actually claim this, but that's what I like to imagine as to why this respected Sanhedrin member chooses the dark of night for their visit. You heard the story. Intrigued by Jesus' reputation as a teacher and a healer, Nicodemus wants to see for himself and confirm or refute the sacred origins of Jesus' authority and power. And the conversation includes Jesus sharing some of his lessons Nicodemus. "To see the realm of God", Jesus tells us, "A person must be born anew." In an almost comical reminder that there is a real danger in taking teachings overly literally sometimes, Nicodemus replies, "But how can I go and squeeze back into my mother's womb?" Now the Greek readers of the gospel would have seen the confusion because the word for born anew can also mean born from above. Jesus' next words though make it very clear that he meant it in that above way

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because he speaks of a spiritual birth which is very different than what Jesus says we might have experienced physically. And Jesus has that proverb. *What is Born of the flesh is flesh. What is born of the spirit is spirit.* This is a dualism that would be familiar language to those Greek speaking audiences familiar with Greek philosophical thought.

You see, Jesus' whole thesis with Nicodemus seems to be that to get the Pharisaic leader out of his head, get it out of the ground literally and focus on his where he was only focusing on his, in the world, down-to-earth experiences and instead have Nicodemus imagine something broader, seeing a wider view. See, Nicodemus's vision is clouded by the physical, while Jesus is trying to open his view to something more metaphysical, beyond the physical, the spiritual, the mystery, the ideals of God. And I don't blame Nicodemus. We're all Nicodemus at some point or another. We gravitate to what is familiar, and we find the most true, what we've borne out of our own experience.

If John chapter 3 was the only biblical reference that we had to Nicodemus, we might have no idea whether Jesus made any impact on the thinking of this Sanhedrin leader with those late night teachings. But Nicodemus appears two more times in the book of John. In chapter 7, in the context of that story, the chief priests and the council of the Pharisees have had their concerns about Jesus and they'd sent temple guards to go and arrest Jesus, but they come back without Jesus. And the leaders say, "Well, why didn't you come back with him?" And the guards reply, "No one has ever spoken like this one does." And then they say, "Well, so they he deceived you, too." And then he probably points around the room of all these Pharisees and chief priests and he says, 'Look, none of the Pharisees here believe in him. The mob out there is being deceived and they know nothing of the law. And I kind of wonder how Nicodemus felt like being pointed at. *None of the people here think of any good about him.* And we get a little bit of a hint that maybe Nicodemus does because Nicodemus points out a question of law and says, "Does our law not require that we don't condemn a person without first hearing from them to find out what they've been doing. He kind of pulls them back. The leaders had said of the crowds, *they know nothing of the law.* And Nicodemus replies, *Well, doesn't our law say we should actually hear from this person before condemning them?* And that hints that Jesus teachings maybe did challenge Nicodemus's longheld views.

After John's gospel tells its readers about Jesus' crucifixion in the 19th chapter, we're told that a person named Joseph of Arimathea asks Pilate to be able to remove the dead body of Jesus down from the cross. John notes that this Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one because he was afraid of the religious leaders. But he was respected enough to maybe get an audience with Pilate or some of Pilate's representatives to seek permission to remove the body of this condemned, which I'm sure would be just fine with the Romans because then they didn't have to send their detail out to remove the body and get that cross ready for the next round of crucifixions. But here's the interesting detail in chapter 19 in John. When Joseph goes to take away Jesus' body, we're told that Nicodemus accompanies him and that Nicodemus even brings the burial spices. In John, it is Joseph and Nicodemus who prepare Jesus' body for burial. They take him down. They wash the body. They put the spices on. And they wrap Jesus in the death cloth. But because it's late in the day and the day of preparation for the Passover is going to be upon them at sunset, they hastily (temporarily apparently) store Jesus' wrapped and spiced body into a nearby empty tomb presumably where they would come back after the sacred days and do a more proper burial.

New opportunities can beckon us away from our familiar paths. Seldom do we simply do a complete 180 and just go one way and turn the other. And God bless those who can. My mom quit smoking on a dime. Actually, on a dollar because she used to pay a dollar for a pack of cigarettes. And when they put a new tax on, she said, "That's enough." And as far as I know, mom hasn't smoked since. That was in the early 80s.

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Sometimes we feel the need to be a little cautious. Fair enough. We want to check things out without completely setting aside all the current patterns. We're just going to experiment. We say that we're going to move the table in front of the church to a different location. It's just an experiment. I think that's Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea story. They were drawn to Jesus but there was a fear that kept them from an overt display of seeing things differently.

Sometimes we get sidetracked down the road. I think that's Terah's story. He leaves Ur behind him with his eyes set on Canaan, but that vision is set aside when the family gets to Heron, which seems like a good place to settle.

Sometimes the vision needs to be fulfilled by someone else. I mean, Haran was clearly good enough of a relocation place for Terah, who was able to complete a good and a long life in this new home. The original vision was kind of met. It's just the location changed. The original vision was to move and relocate the family from Ur but instead of going to that place, they went to this place. So, it's kind of like Terah fulfilled the goal.

But sometime after his father's death, it's Abram who's inspired to complete the journey of the original vision. And we're told it's literally an inspiration, a spiritual inspiration, God calling Abram on. And even though we know that they're heading for Canaan to fulfill that original vision, Abram is simply trusting to go.

I guess there's really a fourth path as well. Among the characters I've talked about, Nahor, the other son, never left at all. The pattern wasn't going to change what bit.

When there's a calling, when there's an inspiration to break out of our familiar patterns, there are many ways for that journey to take place. And there is logic and there are factors that bring value to the multiple possibilities of what lies before us. We may take the cautious path to ensure that we can still have life enough to make progress. We may discover value worth settling on a partway down the road to re-evaluate our original goals and come up with new more workable goals or more appropriate goals for us, leaving maybe the later bits of work to others.

Sometimes we are grateful for those who venture toward a new thing without having all of the worries figured out ahead of time.

What binds us all in all of these paths is that they begin with a fresh promise of something better. There's so much in our world, even parts very close to home, that beckons us to go on to a more hopeful, more fulfilling path that is founded, as Jesus said, not on condemnation, but on love. As we make our move down these paths, may we always remember we are not alone.

Amen.

#333VU Love Divine

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