

HEAR WHAT THE SPIRIT IS SAYING

In Scripture and Prayer and The Great Cloud of Witnesses

Week of June 11, 2023

Collect for Proper 5

O God, from whom all good proceeds: Grant that by your inspiration we may think those things that are right, and by your merciful guiding may do them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Amen. BCP 229

What are “Track 1” and “Track 2”?

During the long green season after Pentecost, there are two tracks (or strands) each week for Old Testament readings. Within each track, there is a Psalm chosen to accompany the particular lesson.

The Revised Common Lectionary allows us to make use of either of these tracks, but once a track has been selected, it should be followed through to the end of the Pentecost season, rather than jumping back and forth between the two strands.

The first track of Old Testament readings (“Track 1”) follows major stories and themes, read mostly continuously from week to week. In Year A we begin with Genesis, in Year B we hear some of the great monarchy narratives, and in Year C we read from the later prophets.

A second track of readings (“Track 2”) follows the Roman Catholic tradition of thematically pairing the Old Testament reading with the Gospel reading, often typologically—a sort of foretelling of Jesus Christ’s life and ministry, if you will. This second track is almost identical to our previous Book of Common Prayer lectionary.

Within each track there may be additional readings, complementary to the standard reading; these may be used with the standard reading, or in place of it.

Credit to The Rev Dr. J. Barrington Bates on [The Lectionary Page](#)

Genesis 12:1-9 NRSVue, 2021

The opening lesson is the story of God’s call of Abraham (who was then known as Abram) to leave his own country and become the father of a great nation. Trusting in the Lord, Abram and his family forsake all that is familiar to them to set out for an unknown land. In this new country they worship the Lord. This story is a major illustration of the way God acts in history by calling individuals to venture forth in faith.

- 1 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.
- 2 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.
- 3 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.”
- 4 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.

- 2**
5 Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot and all the possessions that they had gathered and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran, and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan,
- 6 Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land.
- 7 Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him.
- 8 From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east, and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord.
- 9 And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.

Exploring Genesis 12:1-9

By Donald P. Olsen, Minister, Plymouth Congregational Church, Wichita, Kansas

"So Abram went, as the LORD had told him." This is how we are introduced to the patriarch of three faith traditions: "so Abram went." [...]

We read that God tells Abram to go to a place he has never been before—go from your country, go from your kin, go from your father's house—go, and I will show you where. So Abram goes. We know so little about this man. We know nothing of his pedigree, his credentials or qualifications. Was Abram a righteous man as was Noah? We are not told. Why would God call him? The text is silent on these matters, so we do not know—yet, we do.

We know the ways of God through our experience of God today. In our churches, in our congregations, in our own callings as ministers, and in the callings of others to both lay and ordained service, we can see God's method at work. We see that God does not always call those with the best credentials or the shining pedigrees. We see, again and again, that a faithful response to God's leading results in a blessing of gifts and talents, of learned and acquired skill sets sufficient for the task to which an individual is called. God calls and Abram responds faithfully. The author of Hebrews writes that because Abram considers the maker of the promise to be the keeper of promises, he responds faithfully and receives the power of procreation and the skill set to become a great nation ([Heb. 11:8-12](#)).

The city Haran, from which Abram is called, means "highway" or "crossroads." God's call to Abram at this crossroads and Abram's faithful response is the starting point of Israel's history. This text could be used to explore your own crossroads; the needs, callings, and challenges of your congregation as well as the faithful response of its individual members to God's call. Such exploration may lead to naming some of the unique crossroads faced by your congregation and perhaps the demarcation of new starting points in the ministry of your

church. Sunday school teachers, ushers, deacons, liturgists, lay preachers, and individuals sensing a call to ordained ministry are at a crossroad. Do I have the time? Do I have the gifts and talents, the skill set for this task? Am I a “good enough” person to fill this role?

Our own experience and the witness of Scripture concur that the one who calls is the one who equips. The one who equips always leads the called to more complete expression of the persons they were created to be. Consequently, if the call is of God, the answer to all the above questions is yes. A faithful response is the embrace of what God has already called into being—a newness of being—and the release from what is known for what is promised. A faithful response is neither forced nor coerced, but a step freely taken toward our true selves.

The notion of embracing newness and relinquishing what has been connects this text with today’s Gospel, the story of Nicodemus (John 3:1–17). To be born from above or anew or again may be understood as the embrace of God’s calling—of one’s true vocation—that necessitates taking leave of one’s self-directed course. To leave the comfort of the known for the promise of the unknown realities of God is a form of birth.

So Abram was born into a new reality that God called into being. Every new birth is a blessing, and every blessing holds the possibility of newness. God promises to make Abram a great nation and to bless him so that through Abram all nations will be blessed. An exploration of blessing offers another perspective on this text.

[...] The God of Abram is the God of all creation. The whole of humanity is blessed by God’s creation of the creatures of sky, field, and sea; the grains, vegetables, and fruits for harvest; and the system of sun, rain, soil, and wind that maintains them for our use and consumption. This blessing is expanded further for a third understanding that includes the gifts, talents, and abilities—even biological abilities—that God bestows upon individuals. One of God’s blessings to Abram and Sarai is to change the inability to bear children into the ability to be fruitful. In the whole of the First Testament, God blesses people with the drive and vitality to cocreate with God through discovery, invention, and productivity. The blessing of curiosity and creativity bestows upon humanity the power to create and acquire.

The faithful response of those who have gone before us has showered humankind with wealth, prosperity, freedom, creativity, and family beyond the imagination of Abraham the patriarch. God calls us to go; will our response offer blessings to those who follow us? If our history reads, “So she went, as God told her,” blessings will flow for generations beyond our faithful response

“Pastoral Perspective on Genesis 12:1-4a” in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, vol. 2* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010)

Psalm 33:1-12 NRSVue, 2021

Joyful are the people who trust in the Lord. From heaven, God sees all who dwell on earth.

1 Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous. Praise befits the upright.

- 4**
2 Praise the Lord with the lyre;
make melody to him with the harp of ten strings.
- 3 Sing to him a new song;
play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts.
- 4 For the word of the Lord is upright,
and all his work is done in faithfulness.
- 5 He loves righteousness and justice;
the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord.
- 6 By the word of the Lord the heavens were made
and all their host by the breath of his mouth.
- 7 He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle;
he put the deeps in storehouses.
- 8 Let all the earth fear the Lord;
let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him,
- 9 for he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.
- 10 The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing;
he frustrates the plans of the peoples.
- 11 The counsel of the Lord stands forever,
the thoughts of his heart to all generations.
- 12 Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord,
the people whom he has chosen as his heritage.

Exploring Psalm 33:1-12

Verse notes from the Jewish Study Bible

Ps. 33: Praise of God’s faithful care and the joy of trusting in God. The creator of the world maintains control of it; in contrast to Him, all human power pales in significance. [Pss. 33 and 34](#) have been incorporated into the introductory prayers to the morning service on Sabbath and festivals.

1–3: For music as a form of worship, see [81:2–4](#); [92:2–4](#); [150:3–5](#).

4–6: The world that God created by his word, which is right, is full of God’s faithful care. The world is, as a result of how it was created, a place of rightness, justice, and “hesed.”

6–9: As in Gen. ch 1, creation is by the divine word: the making of the “heavens,” the confinement of the chaotic waters, and the peopling of the earth ([Gen. 1:6–10](#)).

7: Cf. [Exod. 15:8](#) where the water of the Sea of Reeds is piled in a heap.

8–11: All inhabitants of the world must be in awe of the creator. Human plans can easily come to naught, but God’s plans are eternal.

12: Israel's special relationship with God.

Adele Berlin, Marc Zvi Brettler, and Michael Fishbane, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1317–1318.

Romans 4:13-25 NRSVue, 2021

In this lection Paul explains that the new relationship with God is open to everyone who follows in the way of Abraham's faith. This means that righteousness before God comes through God's free gift and the response of faith—not because of obedience to the law. This was first true in the case of Abraham, who trusted in God's promise before the law even existed. This faith was "reckoned to him as righteousness." Now it is true for all who have faith and so show themselves to be among Abraham's descendants from many nations.

- 13 For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith.
- 14 For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.
- 15 For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law, neither is there transgression.
- 16 For this reason the promise depends on faith, in order that it may rest on grace, so that it may be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (who is the father of all of us,
- 17 as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations"), in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.
- 18 Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So shall your descendants be."
- 19 He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), and the barrenness of Sarah's womb.
- 20 No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God,
- 21 being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.
- 22 Therefore "it was reckoned to him as righteousness."
- 23 Now the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone
- 24 but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead,
- 25 who was handed over for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

6

Exploring Romans 4:13-25

By Diane Givens Moffett, Senior Pastor, St. James Presbyterian Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

Paul begins this passage by indicating that the promise of God illustrated in Abraham rests on faith. This promise is apart from the law and demonstrates the grace of God guaranteed to all Abraham's descendants. By substituting "the world" as Abraham's inheritance (v. 13), rather than the "land" as indicated in the book of Genesis ([Gen. 12:7](#)), Paul makes the point that Abraham's descendants include Jews and Gentiles. This he expounds upon in verse 16, when he states that Abraham "is the father of all of us." The importance of the promise being based on faith rather than the law is underscored by the fact that the law is connected to God's wrath. Those who do not keep the law suffer the penalty of their misdeeds. Gentiles did not adhere to the law and Jews could not perfectly follow the law; so, if based upon the law, the promise would be empty and void. However, where there is no law, there is no wrath (v. 15b)—that is why the promise is based upon faith. Having successfully argued his point concerning the fulfillment of the promise based upon faith, Paul then expounds upon faith. His understanding is important for pastors helping parishioners to apply faith appropriately.

A young woman was so zealous for God that she enrolled in seminary to prepare for ministry. Among her classmates was a student suffering from a form of muscular dystrophy that made it hard for him to walk. One morning after class she observed him having trouble walking down the long flight of stairs. In an effort to encourage her classmate she told him, "If you have faith, brother, God can heal you." Her humble, but wise peer, smiling, turned to her and said, "I do have faith. God already has." His response indicated a deeper understanding of faith. It is this understanding of faith that Paul seeks to illustrate in this passage of Scripture.

Contrary to what many believe, Abraham is not someone Paul suggests that we imitate. Rather, he is the example of the attributes of faith. In his life we see God's power operating—calling "into existence the things that do not exist" (v. 17). We learn from this passage that Abraham was "hoping against hope" (v. 18) he would become the father of many nations. The hoping against hope is important to understanding faith. Abraham did not hope in himself, because he considered his body dead; the subject of Abraham's faith was God. Abraham believed God could bring forth life from the dead and that God would fulfill God's promise to make him "the father of many nations" (v. 18). In sharing Abraham as the example of faith, Paul suggests God as the object of our faith.

At first glance, believers may find Paul's assertion in verse 19 difficult to understand. Those of us who know the biblical story are aware that Abraham struggled in faith, especially as the fulfillment of the promise was prolonged (see [Gen. 17:15–17](#)). However, in stating that "he did not weaken in faith" (v. 19), Paul implies that Abraham did indeed struggle with his faith as he acknowledged his age and Sarah's barrenness. In verse 20, Paul makes another difficult

assertion, that “no distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God.” The understanding of this statement becomes clear when we understand the meaning of verse 20b. Leander E. Keck and other New Testament scholars agree that the better translation is “Abraham was made strong in faith.”[1] The one who made Abraham strong was God. Abraham gave glory to God because he was convinced in what “God was able to do” (v. 21). Therefore, Paul tells us Abraham’s faith was reckoned as righteousness (v. 22). The righteousness is not something Abraham earned because he believed hard and did not struggle in his faith. It is not how hard we believe, but the One in whom we believe, that makes us right with God.

The importance, not of faith in our own will and volition, but of faith in God is further expressed in the concluding verses of this passage. Paul explains that the words “it was reckoned to him” were not written for Abraham’s sake alone, but for ours also (vv. 23–24). Paul then restates what he says all along—that we who believe in God who raised Jesus from the dead will also be reckoned as righteous. He further elaborates on the events that led to our justification by reminding us that Jesus was “handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification” (v. 25).

We live in a world where people advocate the prosperity gospel and “name it, claim it” philosophies.[2] Such thinking places the believer’s faith at the center of power. Some would even lead us to believe that if our faith is strong, we can have anything. When this is the case, how hard one believes is the determining factor for the fulfillment of God’s promises. This reverses the intent of God’s grace and places people in the position of power. It can produce a weight of guilt in Christians when the promise is not realized. On the other hand, if the promise is fulfilled, the emphasis can be on the believer’s faith—“power” that steals God’s glory. In both cases, faith is misappropriated as the object of the believer’s will and volition.

Pastors may use this passage to help persons who mistakenly consider their faith as the object of faith. A sermon on the dangers of believing in faith would be appropriate, for Paul is not teaching belief in faith per se, but belief in God who is powerful. Faith is important because faith is the agency of righteousness. For Christians, Christ is the agent or content of our faith. It is in him that we believe.

Notes

[1] Leander E. Keck, *Romans, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 129.

[2] Positive Confession, PMA, *Prosperity Gospel and the New Age*; <http://www.rapidnet.com/~jbeard/bdm/Psychology/posit.htm>. *No longer available online.*

“Pastoral Perspective on Romans 4:13–25,” in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, vol. 3* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011).

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26 NRSVue, 2021

In the gospel story Jesus calls Matthew the tax collector to be his follower, heals a woman with hemorrhages, and raises a young girl from death. Tax collectors at this time were looked down upon as extortionists and collaborators with the occupying Roman enemy. Yet it is not those who are considered well who require Jesus' acceptance of them, but those who are in need of healing. Jesus remembers God's words spoken through the prophet Hosea, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Jesus is then shown acting in mercy through the healing of the woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages (which would have rendered her unclean), and in the raising of the daughter of the synagogue official.

- 9 As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax-collection station, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.
- 10 And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with Jesus and his disciples.
- 11 When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"
- 12 But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.
- 13 Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous but sinners."
- 18 While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader came in and knelt before him, saying, "My daughter has just died, but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live."
- 19 And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples.
- 20 Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from a flow of blood for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak,
- 21 for she was saying to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well."
- 22 Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And the woman was made well from that moment.
- 23 When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion,
- 24 he said, "Go away, for the girl is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him.
- 25 But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up.
- 26 And the report of this spread through all of that district.

Exploring Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

By Stephen Butler Murray, Senior Pastor, The First Baptist Church of Boston, Massachusetts, and College Chaplain and Associate Professor of Religion, Endicott College, Beverly, Massachusetts

The two passages from Matthew that we are invited to consider are rich theological material. The first passage, Matthew 9:9–13, is representative of the calling narratives of the disciples, specifically that of the calling of the tax collector Matthew. The second passage, Matthew 9:18–26, in which a dead girl is raised and a woman is healed, is a careful and beautiful commentary on the vital power of faith.

In the calling of Matthew, Jesus is walking along and sees Matthew sitting at his tax booth. It is unclear whether Jesus speaks, “Follow me,” as an invitation or a command, just as it is unclear whether Matthew finds his socially unsavory work to be personally satisfying or merely necessary for the maintenance of his family. In the brisk narrative, Matthew gets up and follows Jesus, seemingly leaving behind his everyday labor of tax collecting for his newfound vocation of discipleship. All that we know of Matthew are his name and his work, and as he moves from work to vocation, Matthew’s identity changes fundamentally also.

Matthew’s old life is not hours old when following Jesus lands him directly in the company that he had left, at dinner with tax collectors and sinners. The mantle of his new vocation is so fresh that he must have blended in unblinkingly as one of the social and moral outcasts at the table, most probably colleagues and familiar names. Looking upon this display, the Pharisees critically ask Jesus’ disciples why Jesus would eat and socialize with such noxious people. Jesus responds by recalling Hosea 6:6, saying that God desires mercy, not sacrifice, for “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.” This is an interesting interplay, because the Pharisees, who often are portrayed as self-righteous, clearly are not the party with whom Jesus seeks discourse.

In qualifying his fellows at dinner as sinners, Jesus categorizes them as people in need of redemption, people who may acutely desire redemption but fear they could never attain it, due to their lifestyle and work. This preferential option for the sinner over the righteous person is reminiscent of Gustavo Gutiérrez’s claim of God’s preferential option for the poor. Just as the poor are most in need of God’s generosity and grace, so too are the social and moral outcasts among Jesus’ dinner party. To take this one step further, if we interpret Jesus’ response to the Pharisees as prioritizing his call to sinners over the righteous because the righteous do not understand themselves to be in need, we are left wondering if Jesus offers any call to those who deem themselves “righteous.”

Might it be that sinners recognize their own need, while those who see themselves as righteous are too full of pride and hubris to comprehend their need for God’s graceful mercy? Declaring oneself righteous before Jesus is to make a claim that no mortal could ever sustain. We all are sinners, but the sinner who understands her need is different from the sinner who claims to need no assistance; the former welcomes Jesus into her life, while the latter slams shut

the doors of hospitality. Christ holds close those who are most in need of God's mercy and who recognize their need.

The second passage is important because it places an immediate reversal of fortune upon the powerful and the righteous. A leader of the synagogue, supposedly among the most righteous men of all, arrives, with both an insurmountable need and a startlingly clear faith in Jesus' capacity to overcome the insurmountable. The man's daughter has died, and he is certain that if Jesus will come and lay his hand on her, the girl will live. Without comment or question, Jesus gets up to follow him. As he does so, a woman who has been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years also comes forward. With a clear faith in Jesus' ability to heal her, she reaches out to touch the fringe of his cloak. The text is unclear if this is menstrual hemorrhaging; if it is, the woman would be ritually unclean in the Jewish tradition, and for her to touch Jesus himself would be to make him unclean as well. So it is a clever theological move by the author of Matthew that she reaches not for Jesus, but for his clothing.

Jesus' response to the woman is breathtaking and theologically meaningful; he tells her that what has made her well is her faith. Jesus does not claim to have done anything to have made her well, nor does he require anything of the woman; instead, he acknowledges that her faith is the agency of her healing. This is a powerful echo of what Jesus has said to the Pharisees in verses 12–13; the one who is healed is the one who recognizes her own need and has faith. Just so, the leader of the synagogue comes to Jesus in need, setting aside any vanity or self-righteousness in expressing his faith, and Jesus responds by restoring his daughter to life. It is noticeable that Jesus does not claim any great power in doing this, instead maintaining that the girl merely has been sleeping, and is not dead, which causes the professional mourners who are present to mock him. It seems as though it is the faith of the father, a leader of the synagogue, that is the agency that leads to his daughter's revivification.

In these passages, Jesus comes to those who are in need and recognize that they are in need. The righteous either are not in need or are too full of hubris to understand how deeply they are in need. Further, faith is a restorative agent unto itself, a graceful, unmerited gift from God that precedes the presence of Jesus, providing the rich and fertile soil from which the acts of Jesus may grow, may bloom.

“Theological Perspective on Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26,” in *Feasting on the Word: Year A, vol. 3* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011).