

# "Believing the Promise"

Genesis 12:1-4a & John 3:1-17

February 20, 2005

Do you remember the opening of the old ABC TV show called "The Wide World of Sports"? A series of video sports moments flashed across the screen as the announcers spoke the theme line: "The Thrill of Victory - and The Agony of Defeat. I read recently about the infamous scene that went with the words - "the agony of defeat". If you ever watched the show I am sure that you remember the image of a very painful ending to an attempted ski jump. Everything seemed to be great as the skier headed down the jump, but then, for no apparent reason, he tumbled head over heels off the side of the jump and into a snow fence at the side of the course. What viewers didn't know was that he chose to fall rather than finish the jump. Why? As he explained later, the jump surface had become too fast, and midway down the ramp, he realized that if he continued the jump, he would land on the level ground, beyond the safe sloping landing area. It could have been fatal. I am sure that it was not easy to decide to deliberately fall off the side of the jump. But all he suffered was a headache - and perhaps a bit of embarrassment from the constant replaying of the event on national television. Changing course in life can be a traumatic and even painful, but often failing to change course can be fatal in the end.

**Have you ever wondered why you are a Christian? .... why you have decided to follow God? ----- In many ways it doesn't make much sense. And there are many people who would be willing to sit down with you and tell you why it is so silly. You could be sleeping in today. How silly to gather in a place where you have to sit in hard pew and sing really old songs and then listen to some guy dressed in a floor length sheet. How silly to pray to someone you have never seen or study words that were written 2000 years ago. Why do you believe?**

**The scriptures today give us a look into the lives of two people who made the decision to believe and follow God. Abram in the OT text and Nicodemus in the Gospel - 'Abe & Nic'. Why do they follow? It would seem to make no sense.**

**Good old Abe was doing well, it would seem. He lived in a good land along a river that made the land rich in comparison to the vast desert lands around the region. We don't know much about Abe or what was going on in his life before God called him to follow. We know that he lived in a culture that believed in many gods (they pretty much had a 'god' for every occasion) - people believed all kinds of strange things but clearly had turned away from the God that walked with Adam and Eve in the garden or that called Noah to build an ark. But that God called Abram to follow him blindly. He was told to leave his home and his people - leave everything that he knew to travel to a new land that God doesn't even name. There is no**

mention of any discussion of the matter either - no questions asked or answered - no discussion of the destination or how Abe was supposed to get there. There was simply 'the call' ... and there was the obedience to the call - "*Abram went, as the Lord had told him ...*" -- Why did he do it? Why did he change course so dramatically? Why would you believe and follow God?

Nic was a different story -- yet the question remains the same. Nic was a Pharisee - trained in the Word of God - steeped in the traditions of the church - he was a very religious man. And when Jesus came on the scene he made note of all that he heard about Jesus. And now he had an opportunity to talk to Jesus face to face -- we get a glimpse of the honest struggle of Nicodemus as he considers his life. Should he just continue on the well worn path he was on or should he follow Jesus as the Messiah. The discussion with Jesus led to some very disturbing thoughts from Jesus - What is a man like Nic supposed to make of comments like: "*No one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.*" It makes no logical sense - Nic knew it - even if you don't take the demand literally - even if you theologize the whole business and talk about baptism, as we good Lutherans do, how does any of that make any sense. It is illogical to think that the act of Baptism with its little dab of water can do anything. The whole discussion dealing with Spirit & water & wind blowing, & serpents lifted up in the wilderness & being born from above is really enough for almost anyone to go away shaking their heads and asking the same question Nic asked - "*How can these things be?*" ----- Yet Nicodemus became a believer and follower. He changed course in his life and we see him at the cross after the crucifixion. Why? Why would you choose to be a Christian?

Interestingly, in the cases of both Abe & Nic there is a promise that goes along with the call. They are bold and far reaching promises. Abram was promised that from him would grow a great nation and that from him there would come a blessing. Nicodemus was told that believing led to eternal life. The promises seem to be far too much - too good to be true - for that matter, it would seem they were impossible. But they believed - and they followed.

Perhaps we have become very skeptical in our days. We hear promise after promise and so often they prove to be untrue and the promisor is unreliable. Twice in the last few weeks I have received e-mail notification that people want to give me \$5 million or more. I haven't even bothered to check them out. We are told repeatedly that 'if something sounds too good to be true, it probably isn't.' But Abe & Nic believed the promise - and they believed and followed the one who made the promise.

Why do you follow God? Why are you a Christian? Did you believe the promises? Could you see that if you did not change course the end could be fatal? The agony so such a defeat would be forever!

**I have read somewhere about how someone had broken down that one most well known verse of today's Gospel into 3 parts. They suggest that we see 3 things in John 3:16 - "The fact, the act, & the pact."**

**The Fact: "For God so loved the world**

**The Act: that He gave His only son**

**The Pact: that whosoever believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life."**

**Why do you believe? Do you believe the promise? It has been said that "Faith in God see the invisible, believes the incredible, and receives the impossible."**

**The promise is incredible and would certainly seem to be impossible. But from Abram until today billions have believed both the promise and the one who makes the promise. - - - - Do you?**

**AMEN**