

A Sermon by the Rev. Canon Jack Frederick Nietert on the Second Sunday in Lent, March 20, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

Listen and then go

I want to get you to use your imaginations for a few minutes—to capture in your mind's eye...pictures.

Remember *Life* magazine? Many years ago *Life* dedicated its lead article to people and religion in America. The author of the pictorial essay titled it, "When you think of God, what do you see?" The author/photographer took us on a cross-country Technicolor tour and there were some memorable images, some I remember to this day.

Two five year old African-American girls clad in their Sunday best with bowed heads and hands clasped together in Miami, Florida. At a large rally in Chicago, men from the Islamic Society of North America prostrate themselves in prayer. In Madison Square Garden in New York City, a group of Orthodox Jews listening carefully at a gathering to mark the end of a 7½ year reading of the Talmud, a document which is their expanded laws of the Old Testament. In Tampa Florida an 8,000 member all-male choir—all dressed in sea-green golf shirts listening to Billy Graham. And the article went on and on. These images cause deep reflection—the creator and the creature and how the two relate in our own contemporary world.

I am bringing up this old magazine article in order to ask the question: When you think of God, what do you see? What comes to mind?

With these questions in mind, let's turn to the Bible readings for today. We will see images that mystify and enchant and perhaps unnerve at the same time.

The first picture is from Genesis (12:1-4a, also Romans 4:1-5, 13-17). A "voice" addresses a man well along in years, a citizen of a village called Haran—a town dedicated to the moon god. The man being addressed is Abram, later called Abraham. If he was "religious" in any unusual sense, the Bible never mentions it. He seems to have been a successful businessman and herdsman. Since his ancestors moved northwest along the Euphrates River from Ur to Haran, Abram and his clan have become a permanent family in Haran.

Now I suspect that no one in the community would have dreamed that this pillar of the community would up and move away. Who would have thought that these old folks—pensioners—would move from a safe, secure home to launch out for an unknown destination? Remember that it was this "disembodied voice" that told these childless septuagenarians that they would parent a great nation.

Billy Graham I can understand. Prayer meetings on the 50 yard line, a make-shift altar on a living room rug I can understand. Thousands of men in green shirts I can grasp. But this? Well Abraham and Sarah did follow the voice. They launched out on a journey without a map. They set out to follow a vision of something new—something better—something that for all they knew might only exist in their imaginations. Someone once said that the boldest words in all of literature are simply, "Abraham and Sarah went." Armed with an impossible promise, they went...and Faith as a calling, as a vocation was born.

Now let's fast forward a couple of thousand years from Abraham and Sarah to the time of Jesus. (See John 3:1-17) It's late, everyone is asleep, except for a Doctor of Divinity named Nicodemus. He slips out of his house, walks his camel down to the road before hopping on so that not even the dog barks. He trots across Jerusalem into an unfamiliar part of the city. Finally he reaches his destination. Under the moonlight, he converses with a spirit-filled rabbi whose attitude about religion is peculiar—refreshing at best, but possibly revolutionary at worst.

The point is—Nicodemus went. He too started out that night without maps, at an age when he should have been receiving honorary degrees from seminaries and a check from the pension fund. He too literally risks it all to explore this “water and the Spirit, a new birth from above” that Jesus promises.

Faith is showing up and setting out. Faith as a verb, not a dusty old noun. Faith as the embodiment of the response God wants from all of us—“Here I am, Lord.”

Abraham and Sarah and Nicodemus are the same in their willingness to act on their call “to begin.” This is the essential element of a living relationship with God.

Well...where are we stuck? Have we forgotten what it means “to begin?” What if we are neck-deep in the stagnant waters of a dead life? How much more of a trustless, riskless life do we want to live?

Nicodemus, Abraham and Sarah as models of faith reveal just the opposite. They experienced a profound dislocation—perhaps with a major personal sacrifice. They go...they bleed...they weep...they laugh. They move from false security, to true uncertainty, to deep blessing. Faith, they tell us, isn't a soft pillow, or a cozy home, or a comfortable pew. It is a peace that is no peace, a willingness to go without any guarantees—when the voice calls.

Well, my job isn't to tell you where to go. My job is to encourage you to listen. Your job is to listen and then go. When the Voice speaks—listen and then go.