

Second Sunday in Lent
Cycle A RCL
Revised

Genesis 12:1-4a

The turn of the second millennium BC saw a wave of migration from the Arabian Peninsula into Mesopotamia, Syria, and Palestine. The interlopers, called *Amorites*, moved from place to place using the ass as their beast of burden and so remained within the arable land we call the *Fertile Crescent* that stretches from the Persian Gulf, up between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers into Syria, and then down into Palestine. Not true nomads, these invaders would settle in tents near a city, trade and tend their flocks until forced to find a new location. Often these Amorites possessed sufficient power to force the locals to accept them as rulers. This passage portrays Abram (Hebrew: *av-ram* “father of a multitude,” the same meaning as the Aramaic *av-raham*) as just such an Amorite.

Psalm 121

This *pilgrimage psalm* represents a dialogue between worshipper and priest as the worshipper prepares to depart from the mountain sanctuary in Jerusalem. Verse three in its usual English translations reads like a pious wish that the LORD should protect the pilgrim. In Hebrew, however, the expression has jussive force: “May he not let ... // may he who watches over you not slumber ...” The priest expresses the mocking hope that the local gods to whom the worshipper now returns will protect the pilgrim as effectively as the Lord God of Zion has protected Israel. This same jussive force is also found in verse six in reference to the gods *Shemesh* (“sun”) and *Yareax* (“moon”). While we can easily understand the physical dangers of overexposure to the sun, we may find ourselves perplexed as to how the moon might “strike” one? Perhaps this is a reference to madness, often associated with the moon (lunacy).

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

Paul, the student of the great scholar Gamliel, knew the Pharisaic tradition that it was Abraham’s faithfulness to God that brought him favor from God rather than Torah-piety because God had not yet given the Law (Torah) to Moses on Mt. Sinai. For Paul, trust in Jesus is a return to Abraham’s kind of faith, a faith that can operate apart from the Law. Hence it is available both to Jews who are bound to the Law and to Gentiles who are not.

John 3:1-17

The story of Nicodemus depends on the double meaning of the Greek word *anōthen* (“again” or “from above”). Nicodemus understood Jesus to be saying that Nicodemus had to be born “again” to see the kingdom of God. The reader, however, chuckling at the ridiculous image of Nicodemus trying to reenter his mother’s womb, knows that Jesus actually means birth “from above,” *i. e.* from God.

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