

Sermon for Christ & Grace Church Petersburg, VA
Second Sunday of Lent, Year A, March 12, 2017
The Rev. Bill Queen
“Our Spiritual Inheritance”
Genesis 12:1-4a, Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

when you are new in town or meet a new group of people, a common question often is: “Where are you from?”; that can be a powerful question, because it can open up a wealth of information about a person’s background, family, and connections—all things that reveal a lot about a person

if you think about it, so much of who we are can be tied up with where we are from; that’s one reason why so many people are interested in genealogy; it can be very enlightening to learn about your ancestors; my Grandma Taylor left us a booklet of her recollections of family stories going several generations back to Castle Cary England, where I later had the experience of visiting and seeing my ancestors’ names on gravestones; Lynn Ellen did some research on my father’s side of the family, and we learned that they settled Shackelfords VA; I’d have been one of the First Families of Virginia, except my branch of the Shackelfords decamped to Georgia, and arrived there too late to be a First Family of Georgia

this week’s readings from Genesis and Romans speak of our spiritual genealogy, our spiritual ancestry; this is what we were exploring last Sunday and Wednesday as we discussed the topic of Christ and Grace’s Heritage; but we were primarily looking only as far back as the heritage of Grace Church and of Christ Church, and of Christ and Grace

look how much further back the question of heritage is addressed in Genesis 12: God tells Abram “I will make of you a great nation”; and Paul, writing to the Romans, expands this when he quotes from Genesis 17, that God had made of the renamed Abraham “the father of many nations” and that all “those who share the faith of Abraham” are his descendants; because of this biblical story we count ourselves among the descendants of Abraham; not because we are Jews, but because we share the same inheritance of faith as the Jews

I recall seeing a great visual image depicting a similar idea about our spiritual inheritance; it was in Chartres Cathedral in France: a set of four beautiful stained glass windows, beneath the south transept rose window (the side that gets direct

sunlight all day long), depicts the Hebrew prophets Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, as very large figures, taking up the majority of the tall windows; and on their shoulders ride the Christian evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke, John in much smaller figures, depicted almost as if they were children riding piggyback on them (think of the phrase “standing on the shoulders of giants”); because of their Old Testament counterparts they were able to see much farther than they could have otherwise; so, to add to that image, imagine us riding in a third tier upon their shoulders, still higher, and able to see even farther, because of our Old Testament and New Testament predecessors

these stories and images all answer the question ‘where are we from?’ as Christians; so what does it mean for us to have this ancestry?; it means that we have received a rich and full inheritance, but one of which we must avail ourselves; Genesis and Paul make it clear that we don’t have this inheritance by virtue of birth, but by virtue of faith; Jesus does likewise, but not in our reading today; and it is through our faithful attentiveness that we avail ourselves of this inheritance by reading and learning the stories from the Bible and by applying them to our way of living and thinking; only by doing that will this inheritance make a difference in the way we live our lives in the present; only by doing that will this inheritance make a difference in the world now

and what about the future—those who come after us and our responsibility to hand on this inheritance to them?; most parents and grandparents spend time and effort planning for the material and financial inheritance they will pass on to their children and grandchildren: money, property, things; do we plan as much for the spiritual inheritance we hope to pass on to those who will follow after us?; and not just to our biological families, but to the larger family of the church?; recall that at every Baptism each of us promises to “do all in our power to support these persons in their life in Christ”

think for a minute, what have you done personally to help pass on this spiritual inheritance?; have you lived up to your promise to “do all in your power?”; what more could you do?; what could you do to give the next generations to come, figuratively, the benefit of a piggyback ride upon your shoulders, so that they may be able to see even farther and better than we can?

I want to leave you with one more image: genealogical software programs give you the ability to print out family trees; there are two main types of these; first, the ancestors tree builds upward from you as an individual, showing all of your

ancestors in the shape of an upside-down pyramid: 2 parents, 4 grandparents, 8 great grandparents, etc.; picturing that may help us visualize how broad the spiritual inheritance each one of us has received—remembering that this inheritance has come from teachers and pastors and friends, as well as from our blood relatives; and how all of us together, when we combine all our spiritual ancestors -- what a great cloud of witnesses that makes!

the other kind of family tree is the descendants tree; it forms downward from you as an individual, showing all of your descendants in the shape of a right side-up pyramid; your children, your grandchildren, your great grandchildren, etc.; picturing that may help us visualize how broad a spiritual inheritance each one of us may have to pass on—also remembering that this is not limited to our blood relatives, but to all those whose lives we touch and influence; and think of all of us in this church, each being the recipient of a large inheritance, and each being responsible for the inheritance we pass on; what a big impact we can have

as with Abraham long ago, so too has God given us the responsibility to acquire and act upon our spiritual inheritance and then to pass it on; the future of the church and the continuity of our faith depends upon us to do this; it is a very big responsibility; God has covenanted with our ancestors, and continues to covenant with us to make sure this spiritual inheritance continues; with God's help and with our diligence we can both receive and pass on this important spiritual inheritance, thereby keeping our faith alive for generations to come