

## **Knox Uniting Church Cluster**

**Sunday March 1<sup>st</sup> 2026 – (Year A. Second Sunday of Lent)**

**Sermon (reflection) by Russell Croxford at Boronia Road Uniting Service**

**Bible passages:** Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; John 3:1-12 (NRSVUE)

### ***“Lifting our eyes to the hills”***

#### ***PREAMBLE (introduction to theme)***

Faith is a word we use a lot these days – in many ways and in many contexts – both religious and secular. You don't have to be a Christian to say you “put your faith” in something or someone. As people who put our faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, what do we mean by that kind of faith? Is it ‘blind obedience’ by which we abandon all our human impulses and simply do whatever God tells us to do? I do believe obedience is an important *part* of faith. But ‘blind obedience’? Is faith detached, un-engaged, un-questioning? Not at all! Faith goes much deeper. Faith may not know the answers, the outcomes, or even where our journey will take us. But faith knows, deep inside that God is with us, and God will be there in the distance of our journey. So today we look at this theme called “Lifting our eyes to the hills” (Ps 121:1), which means looking in the distance in faith, not knowing exactly what's there, but having that inner knowledge that God is already present at our destinations. Today we explore what the stories of Abram and Nicodemus might reveal to us about this kind of faith.

#### ***MESSAGE***

Where I do my work at home is at a desk upstairs, and right beside me is a window facing towards the Dandenongs. From this window I get an un-interrupted view of the whole of the Dandenongs from Montrose to Ferntree Gully. Every so often, I find it helpful to take my eyes off the computer and books and look to the hills. It somehow helps me. It takes me out of my immediate agenda and gives me a broader focus, even if just for a minute. I love to look to the hills, and it's probably one of the reasons why I love being in the outdoors and in any wide-open spaces, where the horizon is much further away than the walls inside my house. It's also why I love to gaze at the sky or look up at the stars at night where I see a view much bigger than my own life. I see beyond myself.

In the opening verse of our psalm today, the writer declares, “I lift my eyes to the hills”. (Ps 121:1) It's not really clear, in the context of this psalm, what this is referring to. But for me it speaks of looking beyond myself, beyond my situation, beyond my often very limited view of things, and beyond my own agendas. It's about looking at God's agenda, as mysterious as his agenda can so often be to us. And in that sense, ‘lifting my eyes to the hills’ is an act of faith – faith in something I can't see very clearly, but a faith which is like an inner-knowing, or an inner-confidence that God is there in the distance, he is even there beyond my horizon, and most importantly, he is with me as I journey towards that uncertain horizon.

In our Genesis passage today, Abram (who later became Abraham) ‘lifts his eyes to the hills’, as it were. In his case that horizon was the land of Canaan, a place he had never been to, and he steps out in faith to this uncertain horizon. It was actually Abram's father Terah who initiated the family's journey to Canaan from their homeland in Ur. But for some reason, they only get as far as Haran (about half way) and they settle there. (11:31). It was while Abram and his family were settled in Haran that God says to him to leave everything and go to the land he will show to him. (12:1). Well, not everything, but he certainly had to leave his home, his people, his land.

So, at 75 years old, Abram sets off - from being settled to being unsettled, on an unknown, difficult, long, harsh journey where they would be foreigners in strange lands. They put comfort behind them and became vulnerable and dependent on God. But at the same time, they carried with them a promise of blessing – which would be the overall theme of Abraham’s life. We might say that in all this uncertainty, Abram had this ‘inner knowing’ of God’s presence and blessing. That was his faith.

How does Abram’s experience speak to us? What’s it like to have this ‘inner knowing’? For me, I often come back to that verse in Hebrews 11:1 which says, “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen”. (KJV). When people say to me, “Religion is load of nonsense. Show me the evidence that it’s real”, I rarely try to defend my faith with logical, rationale answers. I see no point in doing that. I can only say to them that my faith is an inner-knowing – it’s the evidence of things I can’t see (or can’t see very well). As the writer of Hebrews goes to say, it was “by faith [that] Abraham...obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going”. (Heb 11:8).

This inner-knowing or inner-confidence we have comes with a promise that God is always *with us* when life is uncertain, and when answers escape us. After the psalmist opens with the line, “I lift up my eyes to the hills”, the next line is a question, “From where will my help come?”. The rest of the psalm gives a very clear answer to that. Six times in the next seven verses it states that God is our ‘keeper’. In other words, he watches over us, in love, like a shepherd – always with us, even in the unknown. This is a psalm of great comfort and reassurance!

When we look beyond ourselves, that’s when faith kicks in. The evidence of things unseen.

Nicodemus was a man looking for evidence of things unseen. He was struggling to see beyond himself. He was a Pharisee, a highly educated man. Yet he was searching for more. Pharisees had a bad name in the gospels, especially in John. Yet they weren’t all bad guys. Nicodemus came to Jesus genuinely seeking answers, as we see in today’s gospel reading. But his seeking was confined to his human intelligence. He wanted a rational, logical way to the life Jesus spoke about. Something that made sense. But Jesus says to him that he needs to be “born again” (or “born from above” – the Greek word ‘another’ can mean both ‘again’ or ‘from above’). That didn’t make sense to him, at least not at first.

It’s like Jesus is saying to Nicodemus “Lift your eyes to the hills. See that there is much more than your own limited view of things. By the mysterious power of the Holy Spirit, discover this ‘inner-knowing’ which will transform you in ways you can’t imagine. This will open your eyes to things of heaven (v12) which your human eyes can’t yet see”.

Nicodemus was being invited to break free from his ‘small view of things’ and set out in faith, like Abram, toward a horizon beyond his wildest imagination. Yes, it will involve suffering and hardship, as indeed the cross was essential in Jesus’ own journey to that horizon, but that is the pathway to life – as Jesus would later explain to Nicodemus.

In this season of Lent, we too are being invited by the Spirit to let go and break free from our limited view. We are invited to ‘lift our eyes to the hills’ in faith. In our own individual worlds there will always be things which hold us captive and burden us. Jesus invites us to ‘look out the window’, to ‘look beyond ourselves’ to new horizons, new hopes, new promises. To be born again, each day.