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Genesis 12:1-4a

Psalm 121

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

John 3:1-17

Into the wreck of history

John Carroll, sociologist from La Trobe, has for some time been pursuing themes around the topic of the collapse of Western Culture. Carroll examines in depth the changes that have taken place in the West since the Renaissance and Reformation. He works on a broad canvas that includes philosophers and sociologists who have, in different ways, said that the decline of religion and community in our culture would automatically cause a collapse of morality and meaning. Carroll is grappling with the big questions of what is going on in the journey from modernity to post-modernity. His latest book, *The Wreck of Western Culture*, ends with an exegesis of September 11 and the collapse of the Twin Towers. The themes touched on here are not new to us. Our culture has been on a journey away from old ways and the signs of change seem to deepen. We know things don't seem to work as once they did. But we know that people still seek meaning and purpose in life, and that the thing we call the life of the soul is not entirely absent from our world.

The title *The Wreck of Western Culture*, reminded me of how the call of Abraham is set amongst the ruins of history. The first eleven Chapters of Genesis is mythical pre-history, not literally true but designed to show us something of what we believe to be true: that our life is the gift of another and fullness of life is found in fellowship with our maker. We know how, from the point at which humans transgressed God's command, life as it was meant to be unravelled. Brother murdered brother; a catastrophic deluge engulfed a world given over to self-seeking. And when civilization advanced and cities developed, mortals sought to reach the heavens with their towers and human community broke down drastically. Genesis 1-11 is an extended picture of how all human endeavours and relationships were tainted by the will to power. Each episode shows the tragedy of humankind existing in a flawed universe. But on God's side we see a forgiving, preserving will to save. It is there in the clothes God gave to Adam and Eve, the mark put upon Cain, and the Rainbow given to Noah. God's preserving actions hold promise for humanity. But once we reach the Tower of Babel history is a wreck and there is no sign of salvation.

The transition to a new beginning comes in God's call of Abraham and Sarah. From the multitude of nations one family is chosen through whom God begins to weave a discourse of life and promise amongst the tragic texture of history.

The text has no interest in anything other than revealing the source of new life that came to the world. God, who brings life instead of death and calls into existence things that do not exist, once more intruded holy purposes into wreck of history. The speech of God simply and abruptly offered a new beginning to Abraham and Sarah. The terms of their existence were changed completely. At the centre was placed a promise, a purpose and a presence that was not their own. God's speech required that they embrace newness, go where they have never been, move away from all familiar markings and

reference points, except one. A situation where there was no risk or imperative suddenly became dynamic. There is a gift which is yet to be given, a promise yet to be kept and a word yet to be enacted. Abraham and Sarah were the beneficiaries of all of this, but they were not its administrators. It came from God's promise, to be kept in God's power. The promise is a gesture of wellbeing, which involved unleashing life and blessing for all the families of the world. The opening verses of Genesis 12 claim that the daring journey of Abraham and Sarah, and their progeny, is an action in which God overrules the death dealing power of life without hope. Abraham and Sarah believed God. They embraced this entirely new intention for their life. And they were transformed into couple of daring and hope.

There are links between this story and the one about Nicodemus who came in from the dark, attracted to Jesus like a moth to a flame. As we heard, he was not without insight or intuition. He had a lot of religious knowledge. He could be likened to a highly qualified minister of a downtown church! Or even a professor of theology! But, unlike Abraham and Sarah, Nicodemus was unable to integrate the speech he heard. He did not embark on a transformed life. He was offered light but remained in the dark.

But we are not left in the dark. The text shows us clearly that if we want to understand these things, it is a matter of seeing that the Cross of Christ, his lifting up in the world, is not just another event. It has its origin in the eternal love of God. The link with the serpent in the wilderness is to say this venomous death is the place to look for a profound sign of life. Here it is asserted that God, whose will is to bless all that there is, gave all that God had, to bring us life in abundance.

It is in connection with this last point that the two stories are the same. They are both stories about God, whose will is for the ultimate wellbeing of the world. In both stories God did not condemn to perish. God entered the dark wreck of history and asserted the promise that life would be found where no hope could be seen, or sign of life predicted.

All of this is connected to our Lenten themes of ridding ourselves of distractions in order to be free and open to hear afresh the word of God to us in Cross and resurrection of Jesus. It is also connected to why we gather to worship, and why we are committed to outreach or mission in the world. We are here to worship because, despite negative trends in our culture which are hundreds of years old, we assert that fullness of life is found in company with a life that transcends our own and we gather to praise the life giver. And there is a link between this and why later Bruce Russell, the Docklands Community Worker is going to speak to us about his work. Our worship of God is linked to our service of God. And through the Docklands Churches Forum, and numerous other forms of outreach we engage in, we aim to demonstrate in word and deed the nature of God who is for us as eternal love. Outreach is a consequence of our experience of God's continuing promises towards us.

Bruce's task is to seek opportunities for Christian presence and mission in this new precinct. The Docklands is a new land, widely different from the old city we know so well. But compared to the cities we have known we may want ask, will this be a place of faith, hope and community? Will Docklands be a place of new life, or will it be a place of death because it has inherited too much from the wreck of our history and culture, and cannot escape being devoid of soul and community? Only the speech of God can make the difference. Speech which, in Jesus Christ, calls his followers to go into all the world and make known the eternal love and light that given us in him, so that others may have life in his name.