

2 Lent, Yr. A

March 8, 2020

Genesis 12:1-4a; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17

This is one of those days when the readings offer so many directions in which to go that it's hard to decide where to focus. To start, you will have noticed that there's that famous line, John 3:16, which those of you who are sports fans will have seen displayed on homemade signs during various games. It's the line that says that God so loved the world that he gave his only son. I'm not at all sure why someone would display that at, say, the Packer stadium, but there you have it. Perhaps it's meant to be an evangelism tool, but I wonder how effective it would be in that setting.

But looking at the readings as a whole, they could be seen as a continuation of what we talked about last Sunday – about the temptation to take God's good gifts and use them only for our own benefit and the further and deeper temptation to refuse to trust God.

Here, look first at the Genesis reading. We read last week about Adam and Eve. We're now in the 12th chapter of the book and humans haven't been doing very well. In fact, the record is pretty abysmal: Adam and Eve being evicted from the Garden, Cain killing Abel, God sending a flood to clear up the mess and begin again and then, just before this reading, humans deciding once again to take matters into their own hands and build a tower that would reach all the way to heaven. God wants humans to love him and to co-create with him, but, by definition, love has to be freely chosen. Humans have to want to find God, to have a relationship with God. So here we have Abram. He's understood to be a searcher, one dissatisfied with the idols that could be constructed and then broken by humans. He wants something more.

In the story before us, God's appearing to Abram is, shall we say, completely out of the blue. It's God's gift, God's initiative. He promises that Abram will give birth to a great nation, that he'll be blessed, that his name will be great and that through him all the families of the earth will be blessed. For his part, Abram is asked to leave home, to leave family and

tribe, to leave without knowing where he's going. There's the trust issue again. And unlike later patriarchs, he has to do that without benefit of doctrine or tradition, without any track record, without any demonstration of credibility – no burning bushes, or plagues of frogs for him. And Abram's response? The text simply says "Abram went." Thomas Cahill in his series on what he called the Hinges of History, says that these are the two boldest words in all literature. But this is just the beginning of the journey and subsequent chapters record what Abraham learned on that journey: that God wants peace, generosity, hospitality and justice; that God intends for ALL the families of the earth to be blessed. Abraham is also remembered for breaking from polytheism into monotheism, which must have been another kind of leaving home. The pagan gods were static; this new God was dynamic, was engaged with history and with humanity. This is a whole new kind of thinking.

You may know that all three religions "of the book," Judaism, Christianity and Islam, claim Abraham as their father. One of the most powerful consequences of that should be that our common heritage would auger well for cooperation and reconciliation because of the inclusive vision that is presented here, right at the beginning.

But that's a bit of an aside. Don't you wonder why Abraham left at all? There must have been a lot of arguments for staying put. He was old, for one. But he also was well-established where he was, respected, well-known, comfortable, secure. Following this invitation from this unknown God was taking a risk.

Then turn to Nicodemus in the reading from John. He was in a somewhat similar situation: elderly, well-respected among his fellow Pharisees, good reputation and he, too, was taking a risk in coming to see Jesus, undoubtedly why he shows up at night. And Nicodemus hears what Abraham heard: leave it all behind, be born from above, adopt a new vision of who God is and what life is all about. From today's text it appears that Nicodemus isn't going to accept Jesus' invitation, but it's worth noting that he appears twice more in John's gospel. Once when he defends Jesus' right to a fair hearing and then once again when he joins Joseph of

Arimathea in bringing spices to embalm Jesus' body. And it's worth noting that both of those actions are in the daylight.

So these scriptures can be seen to be about journeys, especially spiritual journeys, and about change and about conversion of heart, about being born from above. They can also be seen as being about God's longing for us and our longing for God. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, in his tale of the Holy Grail, tells of a knight who searches high and low for that which lasts for eternity and gives life ultimate meaning. He comes upon a singing brook, surrounded by deep meadows and glorious fruit trees. But even as he eats the fruit, it turns to dust, as no feeding of the body can satisfy his deepest hunger. Riding on, he sees a house, its open door a promise of welcome. Standing in the doorway is a beautiful woman, signifying the sweet shelter of home and the end of his heart's desire. But when he touched her, she too fell into dust and the house became no better than a broken shed. But his soul is still craving and he travels on. He then finds a warrior clad in golden armor, but that also turns to dust. Then it's a city on a hill. Surely, he thinks, civic duty and the affection of my fellow citizens will bring fulfillment. But when he reaches the top of the hill, there is no city and, in frustration he says, "Even if I find the Holy Grail, it will crumble into dust." That kind of search is also reflected in the story from an Eastern tradition where a student begged his master to teach him how to find God. They were walking along and talking about this when they reached a stream, whereupon the master took the student and held his head under the water. The student fought and struggled and finally the master let him up. Why did you do that, was the angry question. And the answer: when you want God as much as you wanted breath, you will find him. And both of those stories reflect what St. Augustine said – that our hearts are restless until they rest in God.

But I suggest that we don't have to go on a quest to find God, we just need to open our eyes to the goodness and life around us, along with the opportunities we're given to be a blessing to others. Two stories: The first is a follow up on the fact that Abraham is the father of all three religions of the book and that, because of that, reconciliation should be possible. One of the authors writing about this, tells of meeting a Lutheran pastor working

with an ecumenical group in Jerusalem. He said that the whole time he talked with her, she kept her hands out of sight, as if to avoid drawing attention to them, because they were covered with scars from skin grafts. She was almost killed in a suicide bombing in one of Jerusalem's markets and spent 6 weeks in a burn unit recovering. At one point a reporter asked her why she thought she's survived. Her answer: So that I would have an opportunity to speak about the greatness of God. We are his tools to bring reconciliation to this world. We are called to be bringers of blessing.

And the second brings us back to that John 3:16 quote about God's incredible love for the world. Because of that, any action of love and goodness shows us the face of God. This story is told by a fellow who was on his way to an awards ceremony in St. Louis where the successful and accomplished of his profession were being recognized. It was a crowded sidewalk, he said, filled with purposeful, well-dressed people. And then he noticed an old man, dressed in shabby yellow jacket and baggy trousers, coming towards him. He saw the man stop and stoop to pick something off the sidewalk. Jumping to conclusions, he thought maybe it was a cigarette with a bit left to smoke, or a discarded coin. But when he got closer what he saw was that the man, with a tear in his eye, was holding and gently stroking a bird that had fallen, having flown into one of the building windows. He said that he received his award that day, but that it was nothing, he said, compared to the knowledge that the God of gods was on the streets of St. Louis that morning, disguised in an old yellow jacket and a pair of baggy tattered trousers. Is it possible, that the God who so loved the world that he sent his son, continues to love it so much that he is still present to us, inspiring us to be born from above, to soften our hearts, to search for him out of nothing more than love? Amen.