

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the Second Sunday in Lent



Year A
RCL

Genesis 12:1-4a
Psalm 121
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

The Collect

The Collect

O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy: Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Genesis 12:1-4a

the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him.

Psalm 121

Levavi oculos

- 1 I lift up my eyes to the hills; *
from where is my help to come?
- 2 My help comes from the LORD, *
the maker of heaven and earth.
- 3 He will not let your foot be moved *
and he who watches over you will not fall asleep.
- 4 Behold, he who keeps watch over Israel *
shall neither slumber nor sleep;
- 5 The LORD himself watches over you; *
the LORD is your shade at your right hand,
- 6 So that the sun shall not strike you by day, *
nor the moon by night.
- 7 The LORD shall preserve you from all evil; *
it is he who shall keep you safe.
- 8 The LORD shall watch over your going out and your
coming in, *
from this time forth for evermore.

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the

promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”) —in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

John 3:1-17

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear

the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not per-

ish but may have eternal life.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

SERMON

I got stopped once at a KSP Post 14 DUI checkpoint coming off I-64. “Hey, Post 14. Whatcha need?” I asked.

I don’t know if he recognized me or not, but he laughed and said, “Nothing if you’re not a drunk.”

“Durn!” I said. “If I’d only known, I could have helped you out.” We both laughed again, but I was aware that as I drove off, I was wallowing in a swamp of feel-good. Oh man! It is the best thing in the world to have someone acknowledge your blamelessness, but being blameless is not the same as being righteous, and history teaches that righteous people often come in for much blame. Think of the Germans who saved Jews during the Holocaust or Dr. Martin Luther King. The fruit of blamelessness is the acclaim of our fellows. The fruit of righteousness is often the cross.

The Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you...”

Think about that for a minute! You can only get the sense of what is happening if you remind yourself that Abram was not a Jew! There were no Jews in Abram's time Abram’s life unfolded in a polytheistic household — one in which there were many gods to be worshiped, for his father, Terah, was an idol maker. Moses, the parting of the Sea of Reeds, the Tablets of Stone...all that is perhaps 700 years in the future for Abram. Heaven, hell, God’s law, Bible, God’s Word, God’s Justice — none of that was in Abram’s mind or in the minds of those with whom he lived. Abram’s blamelessness could only be measured against what people where he was expected of him. To become Abraham, father of multitudes, Abram had to turn his back on estimations

of his blamelessness and do as God commanded. Which God? The one he heard, even though no one else in his community did so. The God of Israel was not worshiped in Second Millennium Ur. Abram was not a Jew, but he was father of the Jews for he heeded the words of the Lord at a time and place in which a monotheistic understanding was unheard of. And what a thing is being demanded of him! We're not talking about Abram just wandering off by himself for a little "me time". We're talking about picking up sticks, family, kids and all. Where are they going? He doesn't know yet! Imagine how that conversation went!

"Kathy? Would you see to selling the house and packing up everything we own? We're moving."

"MOVING? To where? Why?"

"I don't know yet."

I will leave it to the imagination of the congregation

to flesh out how the rest of that conversation might go. God was asking a lot from Abram and his family. It's much easier to proclaim your faith if that faith doesn't ask anything inconvenient of you. Blamelessness is comfy. Righteousness is rarely so.

I saw an interview on National Geographic once. The person being interviewed recounted that he was born in South America to a family of missionaries. When he was yet very young his father attempted an outreach to a tribal community known for aggressive behavior. They responded by killing him. What happened next is breathtaking. His mother, after burying her husband, went back to this same tribe and made friends of them, serving them the rest of her days. No one would have blamed his mother for abandoning the mission and going home. She had had enough, more than anyone should bear, really. What she did, however, exceeded

blamelessness. To follow God's commandments you simply can't expect to stay where you are, wherever you are. True, she was a missionary to a distant, difficult and dangerous people. That's where she was, yet she had further to go still. Even from a position of blamelessness, she moved toward righteousness. Seems beyond human ability, doesn't it? It is. We don't like to admit it, but it is. You can't make that journey by yourself. If you could, you'd brag about it. Oh yes you would! In his letter to the church at Rome, Paul made this point. He wrote:

For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness."

This, Paul argued, is why Abram's obedience was counted to him as righteousness for Abram lived before

the covenant, before Moses, before there was Israel. His righteousness could not be explained in terms of faithfulness to the Mosaic covenant. His righteousness arose from his willingness to follow where God led him to put all the world to rights.

Really, it's easy enough for most of us to be blameless. Somewhere in the foundational aspects of our souls lurks the compelling notion that you can be "good enough" to get into heaven. We acknowledge that it is hard to be "good enough" and ask our Father for forgiveness when we fail to be "good enough" without ever asking whether there really are "good enough" people. Acting on the flattering idea that there are and they are us, we strive to be blameless and conflate that with righteousness.

Here's the crux of the matter: blamelessness in the eyes of your community is rarely the same as righteous-

ness in the eyes of God. Blamelessness says, “Don’t move. You’re fine.” God’s righteousness says, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I have plans yet to put the world right and you have work to do.”

Hélder Câmara, Archbishop-Emeritus of Olinda e Recife in Brazil is best known for his aphorism:

When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist.

That puts the matter in very simple terms, don’t you think? It is blameless of an Archbishop to give alms to the poor. But if an Archbishop is called to move beyond giving alms to address the parts of the world which are out of whack so as to put them right, he will encounter resistance. That’s why I suggested we might question if there really are “good enough” people and, by exten-

sion, “not good enough” people. If the poor are poor because they are the “not good enough” people whose suffering is the result of their “not good enough-ness” that’s one thing. Those who don’t suffer and live comfortably can then blamelessly enjoy the fruits of their good luck. It’s quite another thing if the game is rigged so the poor can’t win, they can’t break even and they can’t get out of the game. If that is the case, some are called by the tug of God’s righteousness into sacrificing their own blamelessness to follow God’s plan to set the world right. The Gospel, the good news, unveils God’s righteousness and love for all the world. My belief is that God is working at this very minute to put the world right. It is time and past time for the world to pick up sticks and move in that direction.

Blamelessness is not the same as righteousness, church. Not the same at all.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

The writer of the Gospel of John wrote:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

God loves the world with such an intensity that He would sacrifice even His only son to put it right. Can we not sacrifice our need for blamelessness and the acclaim of our fellows to take up the task assigned to us?

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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