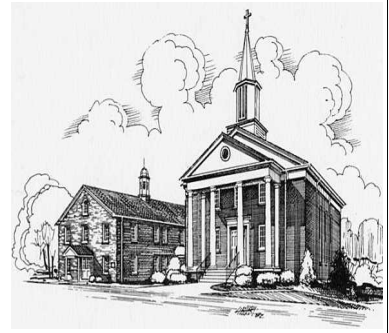


The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Second Sunday in Lent

Year A

RCL



Genesis 12:1-4a

Psalms 121

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

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 Page 779, BCP

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.

SERMON

Our passage from Genesis has always been one of my favorites.

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! 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.

Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran...

Where are they going? He doesn’t know yet!

“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.

I was watching National Geographic this weekend, a documentary on the history of flying cars. Apparently, this idea goes back a long way, though I still don't quite understand why Bubba flying over my house with a six pack would be a good idea. An interview with one of the inventors revealed a story many times more interesting than flying cars. He 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. Now, that IS inconvenient. Where does one go to get that sort of resiliency?

The question posed by his story and the texts for today is

this: is being blameless the same as being righteous? 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 many would call blameless, she had to pick up sticks to move toward righteousness. Seems beyond human ability, doesn't it? Guess what? 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!

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."

Really, it's easy enough for most of us to be blameless. I think my parents did an exceptionally good job of that. Mom

and dad had many friends. Dad worked all his life with the Boy Scouts, and with the unfortunately named “Crippled Children’s Fund”. They were generous with their churches, and served them in the choir and on the board. Is that enough?

Here’s where I’m headed. Someplace 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 and “not 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.

This week I got stopped 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’m 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. Put another way, do you think that I shall gain entrance to the Pearly Gates because I passed a KSP DUI checkpoint? Is that what God is looking for from me?

Let’s think for a minute about the tools Abram (he hasn’t had his name changed to Abraham yet) had with which to measure his actions. Abram’s father was Terah. Terah was an idol maker. Abram’s upbringing would have been in a polytheistic household — one in which there were many gods to be worshiped. What I’m saying is that Abram was not a Jew. Moses, the parting of the Sea of Reeds, the Tablets of

Stone...all that is perhaps a thousand 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, pick up sticks, 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.

Here's the crux of the matter: blamelessness in the eyes of your community is rarely the same as righteousness in the eyes of God. Blamelessness says, "Don't move. You're fine." God's righteousness says, "Pick up sticks and 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." History shows clearly that this often leads to great inconvenience.

The Archbishop of Olinda and 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.¹**

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 "not good enough" people. If the poor are poor because they represent the "not good enough" people whose suffering is the result of their "not good enoughness" 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

¹ Hélder Câmara, Archbishop-Emeritus of Olinda e Recife

righteousness into sacrificing their own blamelessness to follow God's plan to set the world right.

It's now that we can look at Paul's letter to the Roman Christians and get out of it what Paul put into it. Paul's letter to the Romans was written to a specific people at a specific time and condition to address the challenges of that specific time and conditions. You can't read it as divorced from that context unless you want to be drawn astray. You have to keep in mind that Paul was a Jew, and that he was speaking to both Christian Gentiles and Jewish Christians. The message he brought was this: "God's Gospel unveils God's righteousness."

A Jew of Paul's time would see himself blameless, and be viewed in that way by others, if he adhered to the covenant between God and Israel as set forth in the law. We are not talking about the law that I practiced. We are talking about the 613 mitzvot, or commandments, in the Old Testament. A Jewish Christian would be intimately familiar with this ex-

pression of the Covenant, that God's righteousness is seen in God's adherence to the covenant with Israel. A Gentile Christian would find this an alien thought. Paul is the Apostle to the Gentiles. How can he address both groups?

Paul had to pick up sticks and move from his Jewish understanding of the covenant as exclusive to Israel to a wider understanding, a greater covenant with all creation so that the writer of the Gospel of John could write, with integrity:

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.

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. The Jews aren't "wrong" and the Christians "right". The covenant with Israel was a part of God's intention from the beginning. The Gospel, the good news, unveils God's righteousness and love for all the world.

Somehow, American Protestant Christianity has become passive, or that's my perception. My belief is that God has stayed active, 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.

We're rebuilding Putnam Stadium. That's a wonderful thing to do, and backing it will get you no grief. What if it had been determined that there was a great need for a homeless shelter for women and children, and what if it had been determined that the only place such a facility could be built was right on the footprint of the old Putnam Stadium? What would be your reply? Blamelessness is not the same as righteousness, church. Not the same at all.

AMEN

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

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