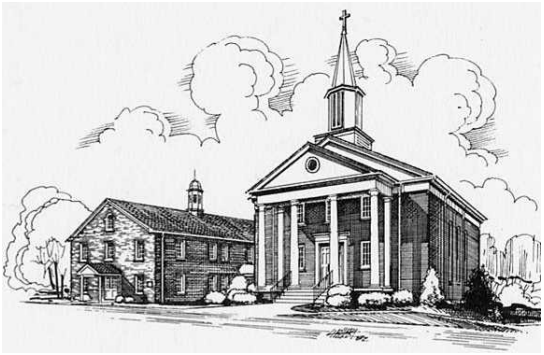
The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Second Sunday in Lent

Year A

RCL



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

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*.

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.

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.”

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

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 <u>that</u> for a minute! We’re not talking about Abram just wandering off by himself for a little “me time”.

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 heard an interesting story once of a man who 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. After burying her husband, his mother went back to this same tribe and made friends of them, serving them the rest of her days. The question posed by this

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. What she did, however, exceeded blamelessness. She had further to go still. We don't like to admit it, but 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."

We are thirsty for approval, we humans, and blamelessness will do if it gets us what we want. I once 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.”

“Darn!” 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 Muslims who hid Jews during the Holocaust.

Here’s where I’m headed. Someplace in 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.

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 represents the community’s judgment of your life. Righteousness comes from God. Blamelessness says, “He’s a good guy.” 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."

Let's think for a minute about the tools Abram 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 in the future for Abram. Heaven, hell, God's law, Bible, God's Word, God's Justice — none of that was in the minds of those with whom Abram 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 his community and do as God commanded. Which God? The one he heard, even though no one else in his community did so.

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 enough-ness" that's one thing. Then, those who don't suffer and live comfortably must be those who <u>are</u> good enough and can then blamelessly enjoy the fruits of their blamelessness. 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 will be called

by the tug of God's righteousness into sacrificing their own blamelessness to set the world right. 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]

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

1 Hélder Câmara, Archbishop-Emeritus of Olinda e Recife

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 expression of the Covenant. 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 move from his Jewish understanding of the covenant as exclusive to Israel to a wider un-

derstanding, 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 if Abram was a historical figure, he 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. The Gospel, the good news, unveils God's right-

eousness and love for all the world.

Somehow, American Protestant Christianity has become passive, or that's my perception. Somehow, we have come to embrace blamelessness, and feel that pursuit of righteousness is just "not nice" because it upsets people. 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 follow Him, just as did Abram.

We have less need for blameless people and more need for righteous people, church.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

This week marked the 55th anniversary of Bloody Sunday.

On March 7, 1965, an estimated 525 to 600 civil rights marchers headed south-east out of Selma on U.S. Highway 80. The march was led by John Lewis and the Reverend Hosea Williams of the Southern Christian Leadership Council. The protest went according to plan until the marchers crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge, where they encountered a wall of state troopers and county posse waiting for them on the other side.

County Sheriff Jim Clark had issued an order for all white males in Dallas County over the age of twenty-one to report to the courthouse that morning to be deputized. Commanding officer John Cloud told the demonstrators to disband at once and go home. Rev. Hosea

Williams tried to speak to the officer, but Cloud curtly informed him there was nothing to discuss. Seconds later, the troopers began shoving the demonstrators, knocking many to the ground and beating them with nightsticks. Another detachment of troopers fired tear gas, and mounted troopers charged the crowd on horseback.[2]

The community saw the actions of Sheriff Clark as blameless. History sees him quite differently.

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.
The Bible texts of the Old Testament, Epistle and

2 Wikipedia, "Bloody Sunday"

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