

The Sunday Missive – March 5, 2023

The Second Sunday in Lent

Hymn 555 Lead on, O King eternal

Lead on, O King eternal, the day of march has come;
Henceforth in fields of conquest, thy tents shall be our home:
Through days of preparation thy grace has made us strong,
And now, O King eternal, we lift our battle song.

Lead on, O King eternal, till sin's fierce war shall cease,
And holiness shall whisper the sweet amen of peace;
For not with swords loud clashing, nor roll of stirring drums,
But deeds of love and mercy, the heavenly kingdom comes.

Lead on, O King eternal: we follow, not with fears;
For gladness breaks like morning where'er thy face appears.
Thy cross is lifted o'er us; we journey in its light:
The crown awaits the conquest; lead on, O God of might!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a7wd2_shSNw

The Collect of the Day

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, forever 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

I will lift up my eyes unto the hills* From where is my help to come?

My help comes from the Lord* The maker of heaven and earth.

He will not let your foot be moved* He who watches over you will not fall asleep.

Behold, the one who keeps watch over Israel* Shall neither slumber nor sleep;

The Lord himself watches over you* The Lord is your shade at your right hand,

So that the sun shall not smite you by day* Nor the moon by night.

The Lord shall preserve you from all evil* It is God who shall keep your life.

The Lord shall watch over your goings out and your comings in* From this day forth, and even for evermore.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j5UgI6SWVbQ>

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.

Hymn 685 Rock of ages, cleft for me

Rock of ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee;
Let the water and the blood from thy wounded side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure, cleanse me from its guilt and power.

Should my tears for ever flow, should my zeal no languor know,
All for sin could not atone: thou must save, and thou alone;
In my hand no price I bring, simply to thy cross I cling.

While I draw this fleeting breath, when mine eyelids close in death,
When I rise to worlds unknown and behold thee on thy throne,
Rock of ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4BINkCJgtmc>

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 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.”

Born from Above -- Lent 2A

We open our inquiry at a pivotal spot. The story of the call of Abram is perhaps the key transition in the entire Book of Genesis. Chapters 1-11 comprise the primeval history: the establishment of the circumstances of life for all Creation. Those stories are full of myths that were already ancient when they were written down, long before the cult of YHWH took root amongst the Hebrew people. They concern things that happened long, long ago and far, far way; but who knows where or when? Today's passage begins the other major unit of Genesis, in which the stories focus on family matters among our own direct spiritual ancestors in times and places we can identify. This is the beginning of The Bible as an historical document.

Up to this point, the biblical stories treat justice as a function of human sin, beginning with the first couple and their fratricidal offspring. Last week, Roger pointed out the extreme unlikelihood of these stories as strictly historical. We have the report of the Flood as divine judgment on human corruption, and the chaotic dispersal of the nations at Babel. But with Genesis 12, the story becomes a history of salvation instead of sin. Quite without explanation, Yahweh calls a particular individual, Abram, who will come to be called Abraham, and instructs him to leave his homeland and set out to a strange place.

The story is about a man, of course only because -- as we know -- the men took charge of the writing of the books; they had custody of the community's memory. And they made sure that memory served the purposes of the patriarchal system. We don't have to look very far to see how societies continue to coopt and warp truth in the service of power through lies both big and small.

From the depths of his faith in a greater good than humanity can imagine -- a good he calls The Lord -- Abram hears the admonition to pursuit of a new life. Because of this, it is said he is 'born from above.' He is now Abraham. Subsequently, following his example, any one of us can be born anew -- from above, as it were -- when

our physical birth with its geographical location is followed by a spiritual one with a theological landscape of its own. The movement is symbolized by Abraham's change of his, and his family's location – the 'Promised Land.' It is an external manifestation of an internal process. We are each meant to have such an awakening ourselves, one that will also result in a metaphorical move. The Bible is not telling us to go out and beat up on some Canaanites (or Choctaws, or Ukrainians) and take their milk and honey. But the Bible is telling us that sometimes people have to move: migrate, emigrate, immigrate, etc. To pretend otherwise is, at best unrealistic; at worst ungodly. According to Genesis. Change and development are inevitable; how we do them is our moral and ethical challenge.

We hear the call to Abram, the first of the Patriarchs, and his willing response: "Abram took his wife Sarai, all the possessions they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and set forth to go to the land of Canaan. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord said, "To your offspring I will give this land."

It is worth pausing for a moment here to reiterate the importance of ongoing biblical interpretation. The story says our patriarch travelled with slaves to a far-off country because God told him he could have it for his family. Of course there were Canaanites living there, it was Canaan. The same exact thing happened in this land of ours, much more recently. God help us, we're not all still under the impression that acquiring persons to do our work for nothing, and displacing persons from their land so we can have it are good and just ways of behaving. Although these ideas are not gone completely – far from it. Abram's may be a perfect example of good faith for us, but his ethics have proven obsolete and toxic. The Canaanites would presumably have made a few other suggestions for his homesteading plans; likewise the Arapahoe, the Chickasaw and the Cree.

Turning to Nicodemus; he has a point. "What does that even mean, 'born again'... how can these things be?" In truth, the clues to

Jesus' meaning are plentiful. They reach all the way back to the beginning of this book of books. Today's readings only steer our attention away from older, more simplistic theories and stories about sinfulness and transgression towards mindful, conscious examples of human faith and divine faithfulness. That is to say they point towards stories of God's promises and human responses to those promises. The second birth Jesus wants us to experience is the story of our response to the grace of God.

We hear St. Paul's illumination of the earlier story as he points out that Abram's faith, rather than his action is what God values in the exchange. As yet, no laws have been explicated to be broken or obeyed. What's at stake is the personal spiritual nourishment of the faithful; whether to be fed by obeisance or starved by defiance. In simpler terms, happiness is contingent upon godliness. Abram does what he hears God telling him to do because he thinks it will make him and his family happy. This idea is characterized as a promise made by the one who will subdue all our foes and fill us with honey from the rock if only we will heed. Sometimes the heeding can feel pretty risky and uncomfortable, but, like Abraham, we gotta stick with it.

In his letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul reminds that Abraham's relationship with God is based on trust alone, not privilege. Such a promise of happiness as God makes is never bound by genealogy. Now, it has become clear that anyone can manifest their trust in God by obedience and thus be counted just as righteous as Abraham. And because of the variety of human culture, trust is not demonstrated by adherence to certain cultural norms, but depends instead on the attitude of the faithful and our commitment to justice, mercy and humility.

In his essay, "The Deepest Self," columnist David Brooks takes a more metallic view of this phenomenon: "Yes, we originate with certain biological predispositions, but our depth, the core of our being is something we cultivate over time. We begin with natural biases but carve out our depths according to the quality of the

commitments we make. Much of what we call depth is built through freely chosen suffering. People make commitments — to a nation, a faith, a calling, or to our loved ones — and endure the sacrifices those commitments demand. Much of our understanding occurs later in life, amid joy and suffering. Theologian Paul Tillich wrote that during moments of suffering, people discover they are not what they appeared to be. “The suffering scours away a floor inside themselves, exposing a deeper level; then that gets scoured away too.” We are continually being born again when we welcome the floor-scouring, heart-opening risks that Jesus demands. Santa Theresa is said to have prayed, “Lord, either let me suffer or let me die.”

The result for Abraham, and for us, is this: If we trust in God’s goodness; if we take the risk of facing our sorrows, becoming acquainted with our grief and, in starting to love anew, we will know deeper happiness. “And I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.” What is it that can make us such a blessing that in us all the families of the earth are blessed? Perhaps we are blessed when in wide-eyed wonderment we embrace and give thanks for each day’s newborn opportunities to gain in wisdom. Perhaps our names become great when everyone who hears of us gets a sense of living justice and love. It doesn’t matter whether there are a billion people or only a couple dozen who know our name, our name is great to them if it has the sound of peace. To each of them we will be a blessing. And blessings are permanent. There is no witchcraft: Curses wither and fall empty, but true blessings are forever.

Hymn 637 How firm a foundation

How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
Is laid for your faith in his excellent word!
What more can he say than to you he hath said,
To you that for refuge to Jesus have fled?

"Fear not, I am with thee; O be not dismayed!
For I am thy God, and will still give thee aid;
I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,
Upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand.

"When through the deep waters I call thee to go,
The rivers of woe shall not thee overflow;
For I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless,
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.

"When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
My grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply;
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.

"The soul that to Jesus hath fled for repose,
I will not, I will not desert to its foes;
That soul, though all hell shall endeavor to shake,
I'll never, no, never, no, never forsake."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1HJtB1l1hfU>

Unpacking a Globe

I gaze at the Pacific and don't expect
to ever see the heads on Easter Island,

though I guess at sunlight rippling
the yellow grasses sloping to shore;

yesterday a doe ate grass in the orchard:
it lifted its ears and stopped eating

when it sensed us watching from
a glass hallway—in his sleep, a veteran

sweats, defusing a land mine.
On the globe, I mark the Battle of

the Coral Sea—no one frets at that now.
A poem can never be too dark,

I nod and, staring at the Kenai, hear
ice breaking up along an inlet;

yesterday a coyote trotted across
my headlights and turned his head

but didn't break stride; that's how
I want to live on this planet:

alive to a rabbit at a glass door—
and flower where there is no flower.

Arthur Sze