

Lent 2
Year A 2017
Gen 12:1-4a
Romans 4;1-5,13-17
John 3:1-17

Come Holy Spirit, give life to my words.

In the name of God, creator, redeemer and giver of life.

Amen.

For God so loved the world he gave his only Son.

This statement and act stand in contrast
to today's lesson from Genesis.

Today's lesson of Abram
follows on the heels of the lesson
of God's destruction
of all living beings except Noah,
his family, and the animals on the Ark.

That lesson reveals a vision of God
who has lost all hope in mankind,
and acts out of sorrow and anger.

From God's point of view,
God had created the world in which
all living creatures had everything they needed.

God had given everything to humanity
only to watch as humankind ran amok
abusing each other,
failing to care for the earth and other living beings,
and turning their backs
on the One who had blessed them with abundance.

So God, in frustration, sorrow and yes, even anger,
makes a terrible decision.

A decision to destroy that which
has been created in love.

But God insures that Noah,
who God declared as faithful,
his family, and the animals gathered into the Ark,
are made ready for survival.

And then God unleashes a mighty flood
across all the earth destroying all living beings in its wake.

It is only then that God realizes the enormity of this catastrophe
and enters into a new covenant with Noah,
his descendants, and all living beings.

The covenant wherein God promises
never again to destroy living beings
and seals his covenant with the sign of the rainbow.

This leads us to Abram, descended from Noah,
and his encounter with God
as related to us in today's lesson from Genesis.

God blesses Abram so that he in turn
may be a blessing to all future families of the earth.

The same Abram,
who becomes the patriarch of three
of the world's most predominant religions,
Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

God blessed and Abram lived into that blessing.

And Abram is a blessing to us.

We too have inherited the blessing
bestowed on Abram and Sarai by God.

The blessing of God and
God's covenant never again to destroy any living beings.

This is the blessing and covenant
made by the One who created
all humanity in God's image.

As a further sign of God's blessing
and love for all creation,
God became incarnate in Jesus Christ.

Jesus, we know, travelled all around
the region of Galilee living out
God's blessing, loving all whom he encountered.

This is what has attracted the attention of Nicodemus.

Nicodemus is aware of the many acts
of love, compassion and justice performed by Jesus.

So Nicodemus is intrigued,
he wants to learn more,
he wants to see the teacher
who has come from God face to face.

We can relate to this.

We know you learn much about
someone when we sit face to face,
when we are able to pick up on facial expressions
and body language.

When you are face to face to
you can get a sense of a person's sincerity.

So, Nicodemus arranges a meeting
with Jesus, but he does so under
the cover of night.

As a leader of the Jews
and a member of the Sanhedrin
he's not quite ready to reveal
his belief and interest in Jesus to others.

And so it comes to be that
Nicodemus and Jesus sit down face to face
and talk with each other
trying to understand each other.

Each an anomaly to the other.

Nicodemus trying to believe
what his heart is telling him
about the One who has come in love and is love
and Jesus trying to
understand the teacher of Israel
who, as yet, does not understand
the presence of God incarnate.

As their discussion unfolds,
Jesus provides Nicodemus with two sentences
that many believe to be at the heart of God,

*"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."*

John 3:16 and 17.

Two of the most misunderstood passages in scripture.

We've heard all manner of interpretations
of these two verses, especially verse 16,
which have been used in the name of God
and Jesus in ways that surely must devastate
the very Ones who are love divine.

Marcus Borg, in his wonderful book "Speaking Christian"
authored an entire chapter just on
this most commonly misunderstood verse.

Now, I promise not to recite it here verbatim.

But I do want to share some of his thoughts so as to dispel some of the more common beliefs regarding these verses.

God gave his only Son

Is commonly understood to mean that God gave Him to die for the sins of the world.

Giving is understood to mean that Jesus died in our place so that we can be forgiven.

So that everyone who believes in him

is misunderstood as a requirement of us to believe in Jesus, as God's only Son, who died for us so we could achieve salvation.

May not perish but may have eternal life

understood as the ultimate result of believing in Jesus is survival of death and an eternal life in a place believed to be heaven.

This commonly understood belief stands in direct contradiction to God's promises and blessings.

If this were, in fact, the requirement set by God then God's love becomes conditional and not the unconditional promise for all humankind evidenced in God's covenant.

According to Marcus Borg:

*In John, and New Testament generally,
the positive connotation of “world”
means the divine world created by God
and the negative connotation of “world”
as the humanly created world
imbued with power and domination systems.*

This then means that in John 3:16,
John the gospeler, is referring to the divine world,
not just Christians,
not just humanity but all of creation.

This is the world that God loves beyond all measure.

This is the world that God has blessed.

Again according to Borg:
John’s Gospel, nor any of the Gospels,
contain the concept of substitutionary sacrifice.

The belief that Jesus died for us.

Giving is understood as the incarnation as a whole
– God loved the divine world so much
that God was willing to become incarnate in the world.

So that everyone who believes in him – is the concept of belief at that time.

It is not a concrete belief in a theological claim,
remember this is pre-enlightenment.

So belief is better understood as beloved.

Beloving Jesus,
giving one's heart, loyalty, fidelity, and commitment
to Jesus is the way into a new life.

May not perish but have eternal life.

A modern understanding of eternal life
is understood as a blessed afterlife
beyond death most commonly in a place called heaven.

In John's gospel, however,
the Greek words translated in English
as eternal life mean "the life of the age to come."

For John, like most of the New Testament theology,
eternal life is future and to be hoped for but also present day.

Just a few Chapters further on,
in Ch. 17:3 John clearly provides his definition of eternal life:

*"This is eternal life,
that they may know you,
the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."*

John clearly refers to the present.

Marcus Borg again:

*Thus in John,
this verse is not about believing a set of statements
about Jesus now for the sake of heaven later.*

*It is about loving Jesus and loving God,
as known in Jesus in the incarnation,
and entering into "the life of the age to come" now.*

It is not about people going to hell because they don't believe.

It is about the path into life with God now.

Well now, how are we to measure whether or not
we should accept Borg's rendition of
this passage from John?

It could just be his interpretation,
one that might appeal to us
as the easier to grab onto.

To believe that we just have to
believe in Jesus who died for our sins
and then we go to heaven
is quite a bit easier than
living a life committed to
the Kingdom ushered in by Jesus.

It feels to me, that living my life
committed to loving my neighbors,
living out of a deep belief of the abundance bestowed on me,
living to ensure justice for all,
is quite a bit harder than making a statement.

So, is there further evidence that, in fact, Borg's understanding was the understanding of the Johannine community?

Perhaps.

The next time Nicodemus appears in Scripture he stands before his colleagues in the Sanhedrin and reminds them that the law requires that Jesus have an opportunity to be heard before being judged.

The Sanhedrin were judges who were given full authority over the people of Israel.

The people of Israel believed that they were commanded by God to obey every word the judges instructed and every law they established.

Now why would Nicodemus stand up in the middle of this body of men to allow Jesus the opportunity to defend himself?

For certain, such an action would not win Nicodemus admiration or support from his colleagues.

And then there is a third time
Nicodemus appears in Scripture.

Nicodemus, along with Joseph of Arimathea,
come to Pilate after the Crucifixion
and ask that they be allowed to
claim the body of Jesus
to properly prepare Him for burial.

Nicodemus brings with him 100 pounds of
balm to anoint the broken body of Jesus.

He comes to attend to the body of
the One who met a heinous death
as did the two thieves on either
side of Him.

To me, those are not the actions
of someone who feels forced into
a statement of theological beliefs
in order not to go to hell.

In fact, Nicodemus and Joseph
having been raised as Jews,
and Nicodemus being a leader of the Jews,
did not believe in the Hell which
is currently understood to be the
eternal resting place for non-believers.

Instead, it seems to me,
that as a Jew, Nicodemus instead
believed in the blessing of the One
who became incarnate and walked
among the humanity so lovingly created.

Nicodemus' actions say to me
that he realigned his life after meeting
Jesus face to face
and committed his life to the incarnate One.

He committed his life to the Incarnate One
by living into the blessing and abundance he had received
living his life in affirmation of that gift.

So what does this mean for us today,
in this time and place?

Are we able, in these times
rife with fear, distrust, and anger,
to stop, turn, and realign our lives?

Are we able to live out our lives
in the sure knowledge
of God's blessing bestowed on us?

Are we able to commit ourselves
to loving our neighbors wholly and unconditionally?

Are we able to commit ourselves
to living our lives out of a deep belief
of the abundance bestowed on us?

Are we able to commit ourselves
to living our lives in a manner that ensures justice for all?

Are we able to live our lives
dedicating ourselves to
blessing others as we
have been blessed?

I wonder.....