

Sometimes it IS who you know – Lent II – 8 March 2020

I speak to you in the name of he who Is, who Was and who is Yet to come. Amen.

The title of today's sermon is as multi-faceted as the readings.

Remember back to the days when you were first seeking employment. Did you ever get passed over for a job or promotion because the other candidate was better connected?

I went to the high school where my Dad was a teacher. Some of my classmates thought it must be awesome to be at the same school, that there would be benefits to this. In fact, nothing could have been further from the truth.

Every year during the first week of school all children of school employees, either teachers, guidance counsellors, administrators, or janitors were called to the Principal's office. We were given the same speech every year. It went something like this..."your job here is to blend in, not to stand out. There will be absolutely no special favours given any of you. If you do well and succeed in school, do not expect a fuss to be made. However, if you get in trouble, expect the full weight of the school administration to come down on you." Nice, eh? It's all about who you know.

There are connections through generations in the scripture for today. Abraham has received a great blessing from God. He is told "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." (Genesis 14.2, NRSV). Abraham, who did not yet have children, was told his offspring would be as numerous as the stars in the sky! He was told that his wife Sarah would conceive and bear a son. And that all of his children; both from Abraham's handmaid Hagar, who gave birth to Ishmael and Abraham's wife Sarah, who gave birth to Isaac; would be blessed from generation to generation for all of time.

Abraham was further told that he would receive the full protection of God. "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." (Genesis 14.3, NRSV) You would not want to be an enemy of Abraham or his household, for indeed, if you were, you'd be cursed.

Our Psalm today, Psalm 121 is one of the happiest psalms in the Psalter. It, too, promises safety to all who believe in God. In case there was concern over who you belong to, it is stated very directly.

"The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand.
The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.
The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.
The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and
forevermore." (Psalm 12.5-8, NRSV)

Wow! Love, forgiveness and protection comes from God. What a blessed life indeed!

Next we move to Paul's letter to the Romans. One of the themes which runs throughout Paul's letters is that of justification by works as opposed to justification through faith.

Paul writes, "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." (Romans 4.2-55, NRSV)

In other words, do you earn God's favour through actions or "works"? Or do you earn God's favour because it is in the very nature of God to love all of humanity?

One who works receives wages, not as a gift, but as payment for services rendered. You do the work, you receive a paycheque. That's not faith, that's simply payment. The struggle for us, as twenty-first century followers of Jesus is that we are hardwired in a certain way. If someone does something for us, we want to thank them and if possible, repay the kindness. Right?

From a very young age, if we are given something, we are expected to say thank you. In my house, if I asked for a drink of water and it was given to me, unless I said "thank you" the cup was not released. I try to be a gracious recipient, yet I must admit, I'd rather give than receive, whether it be compliments or a gift.

Martin Luther, 16th century theologian, priest and monk, wrote extensively about justification through works versus justification through faith. It was one of the main reasons he decided to leave the Roman Catholic Church and found the Church which was to be known as the Lutheran Church. He felt very strongly that if you do good because you'll receive a reward, your motivation will separate you from God's love; not draw you closer. If you reconcile your life as a way of giving thanks for the gifts from God, your reward is of deeper faith.

In other words, you cannot work your way into the kingdom of God. You cannot DO anything to receive God's love and favour. Two difficult notions for us to wrap our heads around...

We move next to my friend Nicodemus. He's quite the character...very much living a double-life. He's a well respected member of the community. He's a part of the Sanhedrin. He has heard Jesus preach and he's intrigued. Yet with Jesus reputation as a nobody from nowhere - as a disturber of the peace - as someone who we would call anti-establishment – Nicodemus, who is very much part of the establishment, wants to ask Jesus some questions.

Nicodemus' reputation is at stake. If the wrong person saw him talking to Jesus, never mind learning from Jesus, his reputation would be shot. His importance in the community would dwindle and he would lose his coveted, respected position. So, he goes by cover of night to speak with the itinerant preacher from Nazareth.

He asks about the kingdom 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?" (John 3.3-4, NRSV)

On behalf of Nicodemus' mother, that would be a resounding "NO, you cannot enter the womb a second time. The first time was painful enough!" Nicodemus is responding to what Jesus mentions about being born from above, as literal re-birth. He does not yet understand the nuances of re-birth. Re-birth is something spiritual, not something physical.

We next see Nicodemus at Jesus' trial when he is challenging his colleagues on the Sanhedrin that they should gather facts and listen before condemning Jesus to death. When his plea falls on deaf ears and Jesus is crucified, Nicodemus brings 100 lbs of aloe, spices and balms for Jesus' burial. He was a man of means and wanted his teacher to receive the burial of a respected teacher, the burial of royalty; not of a condemned, witch-hunted pauper.

The next line of scripture, John 3.16 is, arguably, one of the best known and least understood passages of scripture. Look at any major sporting event and there will be a hand-painted placard waved about, with someone bare-chested and possibly wearing a frizzy fright wig. What does it say? JOHN 3.16! What does it mean?

"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 3.16-17, NRSV)

Heady stuff indeed. In one of the Commentary blogs I follow, I read this. "In seventeenth-century English, "so" frequently meant "in this way" - as in, "like so," or "so help me God." And so in the King James Version of the Bible, it made perfect sense to translate the Greek houtos ("in this way") with the English word "so" - and that's exactly what the KJV translators did in the famous sentence, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..." (John 3:16).

"But today, we more often use "so" to mean "very" or "to a large extent" - as in, "I'm so sad," or "She's so smart!" Thus John 3:16 is often misunderstood today as a statement about the extent or degree of God's love - whereas actually it's a statement about the way or pattern of God's love, as in, "For God loved the world in this way: he gave his only Son..." (from SALT, Commentary on Lent II. www.saltproject.org)

That changes things, doesn't it? God loved the world in this way: God gave us Jesus.

Another parallel between Abraham and Jesus. Remember God telling Abraham he was to prepare an altar, take Isaac and sacrifice him to prove his love of God? To prove that he would choose God above everything, even his own son. Abraham did as God asked. He prepared the altar. Took Isaac for a walk. And then tied up his son, placed him on the altar and began to pray. God told Abraham to let Isaac go and provided a ram for a sacrificial offering instead. Isaac was spared because Abraham showed tremendous love and sacrifice.

God tested Jesus from the moment of his baptism. Driven into the wilderness to be tempted for 40 days, Jesus relayed to Satan that he would not bow down and worship him. His love was for God and God's love was for all humanity.

Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his son and was spared. God loved the world in this way – he sacrificed Jesus to show humanity how very much we are loved.

From Abraham and Isaac to God and Jesus, unparalleled love and sacrifice.
For us. Forever. Not for anything more than love.

So you see, sometimes it IS who you know.
For if you know God, you know love.
And if you love God, you share love with all.
Not just the easy ones. With all.
Thanks be to God.

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Lent II
Genesis 12.1-4a, Psalm 121, Romans 4.1-5, 13-17, John 3.1-17