

2nd Sunday in Lent

Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; John 3:1-17; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

Genesis 12:1-4a is about the birth of a nation – or at least the commencing of the start of the birth of the nation of Israel! Up until this point in the biblical narrative, the Jews have not been introduced as a people. Neither Adam nor Eve nor Noah was a Jew. The stories that make up the first eleven chapters of Genesis are stories about the introduction of humanity and of the society they created. It is a story of God's creation and re-creation of the world, of humanity's capacity to serve its own self-interests at the expense of God's intentions for God's creation, and of God's continuing intervention to seek to redress the situation. In the midst of these stories are accounts of God's action to covenant with people in order to bring about the transformation of their societies. Thus, God has struck covenants with both Adam/Eve and with Noah. But up to this point, the people of Israel have not yet been introduced. This all changes with the introduction of Abram (Abraham) at the beginning of Genesis 12.

“Now 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” (Gen. 12:1-4a).

In Genesis 11:1-9, the author tells of the division of the world into nations, separated by language (the tower of Babel story). He then concentrates upon one family – the descendants of Shem, one of the children of Noah. Presenting the genealogy of Shem brings us eventually to Terah, who “became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran” (11:26). The author then gives attention to only one of Terah's sons, the man Abram. He informs us, “Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot, son of Haran (and thus, Abram's nephew), and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram's wife, and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan; but when they came to Haran, they settled there. Terah died in Haran” (11:31-32). The story is now set to begin both the story of Abram and the birth of the Hebrew nation.

Whereas the author is careful to note that Terah simply chose to move to Haran, intending to go to Canaan, he now presents in Genesis 12 that it is Yahweh who commands Abram to go to a new land. This is an important differentiation, for in the telling of the story of the Hebrew people, the story that will be told is a story of divine intervention. The history of Israel is not a secular history (“first, this happened, then this happened, then that happened”). Rather, throughout its entirety, it is the story of God acting both upon and through the descendants of Abraham to work God's will upon the world so that the world (and not just Israel) might become all that God created and intended it to be. And that included its politics, economics and religious life as well as each person's individual relationship to God. It is at this point in the first book of the Bible that this theme that would become the dominant theme of the scriptures is first introduced. It is the birth – not just of a nation, not even simply of a people, but the birth of *the* people of God – and thus, the rebirth (being “born again”) of both human society and of the environment!

The story of the origin of the people of God is simplicity itself. It consists simply of a command and a response. The command comes from God: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (12:1). This is the requirement placed upon Abram. He is to leave his home in Haran and take his extended family (including Sarai and Lot and their respective entourages) “to the land that I will show you”. Note that the text does not yet indicate to which country Abram and his family are to go. They are simply to set out, “not knowing where they were going” (Heb. 11:8), but obedient to the call of God. It was this blind trust in God that both the author of Genesis and Paul the Apostle celebrate when both write, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:3).

With the command is given a promise, and thus the beginning of a covenant – God’s covenant with Israel. “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” (12:2-3).

The promise is not yet specific. It is the beginning of both God’s interaction with and commitment to Abram. That commitment will become far more clear over the events still lying in Abram’s future, but it will be captured in the change of his name from Abram (“father”) to Abraham (“father of a multitude” or “father of a progeny”). This is the first of a series of promises that, in their entirety, will eventually assure Abram’s descendants of land, nationhood, reputation, blessing and descendants. God is building a people who will become the shapers of the spirituality of the world. And it all begins with this initial promise accompanying God’s command for Abram to leave the security of his homeland, tribe and people and go out to he-knows-not-where!

There is a particular part of the promise that captures the sense of the enormity of what is being required of Abram in its impact upon the formation of all humanity. It is found in the closing words of the promise, “and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”.

The actual Hebrew is quite ambiguous. The form of the Hebrew verb for “to bless” that is used here can be translated either as passive or reflexive. Both are equally valid translations. It can either be translated “and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” or it can be translated “and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves”. There is no linguistic rationale for preferring one translation over the other. Therefore, the decision as to which way the translation should be made is totally based upon one’s theological persuasion and conviction that one brings to the scripture. Thus, the translation used in this lectionary text (the NRSV, which is used for all the lectionary texts in this series), “and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” is preferred by Christian translators (e.g., Gal. 3:8), who want to maintain that God’s blessing of salvation was given to the world initially through Abraham. The translation that most Jews prefer, however, is the second (“and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves”), because that implies that Abram’s action of faithfulness will become an example to the rest of the world so that the Gentiles of the world will seek this blessing for themselves (“May we be as blessed as was Abraham”). In the first translation, it is God’s action that is stressed; in the second, it is the people who act to gain the blessing God has for them.

Thus, it is how you choose to translate this blessing that is an indication of where your priorities lie. Do you prize most dependence upon God? Or are you most excited about self-determination? Perhaps the ambiguity of the Hebrew exists in order to intermingle both ideas in this text – that our spiritual formation as individuals and as a people depends both upon God’s action upon us and our willingness to assume responsibility for our response!

This, then, is God’s command – God’s impossible, open-ended, ambiguous command to Abram and the promise that accompanies it. Now the question is how Abram will choose to respond to this command. And the text straightforwardly tells us how Abram responds. “So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him” (vs. 4a). Abram acts on God’s command, and his entire household – the full entourage – followed his example. They set out, not knowing where they were going. And God led them into salvation history – and the birth both of a nation and of the people of God!

Psalm 121 is perhaps one of the best known psalms of the Psalter – and an exceedingly beautiful one. It deals with God’s continuing faithfulness to us both as individuals and as a people (nation), and does so by using the word “keep” to describe God’s protection and love for us.

“I lift up my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved; he who *keeps* you will not slumber. He who *keeps* Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. 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” (121:1-8).

The psalm divides into three parts. The first part (vss. 1-2) posits the crucial question upon which the psalm is based – “From where does our help (as a nation and as people) come?” And it answers it: “My help comes from Yahweh”. The second part (vss. 3-6) proclaims the constancy of God’s faithfulness to us. This includes God’s intervention in Israel’s and the believer’s history (vss. 3-4). And it includes God’s protective care of us physically (vss. 5-6). Finally, the third part (vss. 7-8) give us God’s blessing of his “keeping” of us.

Let us elaborate these three points. In the first part (vss. 1-2), the psalm states clearly that it is in God that our history, our present and our future rest. This passage is often mistranslated, as in the King James Version, “I will lift up mine eyes to the hills, from when cometh my help” (vs. 1). Such a translation makes it sound as if it is the hills and mountains – our geography – that protect us. That is exactly what Jews would *not* say. Their controversy with the other eastern religions of that day was precisely at this point, because all the other religions posited their gods as nature gods – gods of thunder, earthquake, sexuality and procreation. The unique feature of Hebrew theology was that their god was perceived, not as a nature deity, but as the deity that shapes history. Thus, God’s very name “Yahweh” means “he who causes to be what is caused to be” – that is, the God who makes everything happen, the God who controls and shapes history. So the very last thing a Jew would say would be ‘I will lift up mine eyes to the hills, from whence cometh my help’! No help comes from the hills or anything else (even gods) in nature!

“My help comes from Yahweh, who made heaven and earth” (vs. 2). Thus, the psalmist, in this passage is saying three things: (1) “I will raise my eyes to the mountains”; (2) “From where does my help come?” (3) “My help comes from Yahweh – who made heaven and earth”. The mountains and hills surrounding Jerusalem have been there from time immemorial – long before the lives of anyone presently living or who have ever lived! Therefore, even more than we who can only testify to the continuing faithfulness of God only from the perspective of our own eyes, the hills can call upon a history that precedes humankind itself (for they were created on the “third day”, rather than with humans on the “seventh day”). So we lift our eyes to the hills to ask them a question. And what is that question? “From where does my help come?” And the answer both the hills and we give to that question is “my help comes from Yahweh”. And how can the hills answer that question as well as ourselves? It is because God has created them (“who made heaven and earth”) every bit as much as he has created us!

The psalmist goes on to verses 3-6. How does God help or “keep” us? God does so in four ways: (1) “He will not let your foot be moved” or, better, “He will not let you put your foot in the quagmire”. The Hebrew word translated “moved” or “quagmire” is the Hebrew *mot* which means “slip” or “slide”, as on a slimy, slippery slope into a bog, swamp or morass. The word is used in Hebrew to describe either a slipping into a literal swamp or into the quagmire of the nether world. It captures both ideas here – God will keep you from both physically stumbling but also from spiritually stumbling. (2) “He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep”. That is, God is always vigilant regarding the protection and defense of God’s people. This is a direct reference to I Kings 18:27, in which the prophet Elijah taunts the priests of Ba’al, suggesting that Ba’al must be asleep, on a journey or preoccupied in going to the bathroom so that this god can’t respond to the cry of his people. In this psalm, the psalmist is saying that Yahweh is never like Ba’al! (3) “The sun shall not smite you by day”. This is a reference to sunstroke or heat stroke, a great fear of all Near Eastern people, particularly in the summer, and particularly when on a journey. (4) “Nor the moon by night”. All ancient peoples believed that the moon – particularly when it was full – could lead to insanity (thus, the word “lunacy”, built upon the Latin word “luna” or “moon”). God will protect those faithful to him from insanity.

So, how will God “keep” you – the faithful follower of Yahweh? He will protect you physically; he will protect you from the nether world; he will be always vigilant in his protection and defense of God’s people; he will keep you from sunstroke or from lunacy. In other words, God will fully protect God’s people who place their trust in him.

The third part (vss. 7-8) summarizes the proclamation of the psalm by giving God’s blessings upon those who are God’s chosen. “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” (vss. 7-8). In other words, in all times and in all places, God will “keep” and protect both God’s people and God’s person!

As stated above, the word “*keep*” is crucial to the formation and intent of this psalm. That is why I put the word into bold italics – so that you could see how dominant it is in this psalm. The word is actually used a total of six times – a frequency that tells us that it is a most strategic word in this context.

The Hebrew word actually used here was *shamar*, which means “to take heed” or “to observe”. It is the description of someone who is always alert to danger that might threaten that which the “keeper” is guarding. The assumption is that if such a “keeper” spots danger, he will act upon it either to remove the threat or to protect his charges. The word is used of a guard or watchman over cattle (Gen. 47:6; I Sam. 11:15; I Chr. 27:29), over sheep (Gen. 4:2), over a vineyard (Song of Solomon 8:11; Isa. 27:3) or over an orchard (Prov. 27:18). A “keeper” was also the guard of a prison (Gen. 39:21, 23), and even one who guards over his own tongue or lips (Psa. 34:13)! The idea behind the use of the word in the context of Psalm 121 is that God is always on duty, alert to any danger God’s people or God’s person may face, and ready to act to either remove the threat or to protect his charges. This, the Psalmist is declaring, is how Yahweh, “he who causes to be all that is caused to be” cares for those whom He has chosen to be God’s people and God’s nation. And we can rest in that assurance!

John 3:1-17 is among the best-known stories in scripture, and indisputably its sixteenth verse is the best known of all scripture. It is also the most misinterpreted scripture.

“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).

The story that reaches its apex in John 3:16-17 begins with the text telling us, “Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night” (John 3:1-2). This passage tells us three things about Nicodemus. First, he belonged to the Pharisee movement of Israel – one of the nation’s principle power groups Jesus opposed. Second, he was a “leader of the Jews” – in other words, he was a member of the Sanhedrin and therefore a part of the ruling elite in Israel. Third, he came to Jesus “by night”. Normally, we think of Nicodemus as being an honest seeker after truth, but the text doesn’t imply that. In fact, the text implies the opposite, noting in particular that he came “by night”. Nicodemus came under cover of darkness, hoping not to be recognized.

This “leader” never gets to tell Jesus the purpose for his visit. Instead, he opens with words of flattery, which was an appropriate way of beginning a conversation with a teacher at that time. Jesus interrupts and cuts to the chase with the words, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again” (John 3:3). The words the author has Jesus use for “born again” are intriguing. They can correctly be translated either “born from above” or “born again”; either translation is equally correct. The church has filled that word with all kinds of theological content (“Brother, are you born again?” “He’s a born-again Christian.”). But consider to whom Jesus is speaking, and what he is demanding of him.

Nicodemus is highly positioned in the political and economic establishment. He is a part of “the world” that the gospel writer John has previously described as “darkness”. He is a part of the dominating hierarchy of Israel that has made itself powerful at the expense of the peasants. Now Jesus is telling him, “You cannot experience the kingdom of God – the shalom community – unless you are born again, born from above”.

In other words, Jesus is saying to him, “Nicodemus, if you really want to embrace the kingdom of God for yourself, then you have to start all over again. You have to be willing to die to your dominating way of life, and be ‘born again’ – as if you were a fresh, new baby – living the kingdom life. And that can’t happen except that you are ‘born from above’. You must allow God to work in your soul and life to liberate you from your commitment to all that makes you powerful and be willing to join this relational community of my disciples. And you can’t do that, Nicodemus, by coming ‘at night.’ You can’t do it and escape notice. You can only do it by openly embracing a personal and public life of a politics of justice, an economics of equitable sharing of wealth, and ‘to walk humbly with your God’ as a member of my community. You must be born again, Nicodemus.”

Then either Jesus or the narrator moves on to a commentary on Jesus’ challenge to Nicodemus. “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” (John 3:16). This is a summary of Jesus’ gospel. God loves “the world,” “the cosmos,” the “created order,” the “social structures,” “humankind” so much that he gave his Son so that humanity might come to redemption. God’s love, manifested in Jesus, is so powerful that it brings everyone and everything into the circle of his love (even the Roman Empire).

The basis for judgment is not God’s act but each person’s and each system’s decision. “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the [cosmos] to condemn the [cosmos], but in order that the [cosmos] might be saved through him” (John 3:17).

But if it is not God that condemns us, then what causes the cosmos – the universe, the earth, the systems of the world, humankind, individuals – to be lost? Jesus or the narrator continues. “And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the [cosmos], and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19).

The judgment is that people like Nicodemus (or you or me) choose to join with the political system, their businesses and industry, their religion and value systems in the practice of domination, oppression and exploitation. It is their actions that lead to rejection. Their deeds betray them, for those deeds reveal whether one’s heart belongs to the “light” or to the “darkness”. It’s up to you, Nicodemus? Whom will you choose?

Here we see in John 3:16-17 a magnificent blending of the personal and the corporate, the individual and the systems. John is proclaiming that Jesus has come to set free the entire cosmos from “darkness” (i.e., domination, oppression and exploitation). Whether individuals, the systems and structures or society, and humankind as a totality ever experience being set free depends upon God’s saving action, but the indication that “the world” (we and our society) have been so set free (“been born from above”) is the testimony of our consistent actions and confession of Jesus as our Lord.¹

Integral to Jesus’ explanation to Nicodemus of the need for being “born again” is the Master’s use of an important Jewish symbol. He said to the Pharisee, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent

¹ Linthicum, Robert C., *Building A People of Power: Equipping Churches to Transform Their Communities* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media and World Vision Press, 2006), pp. 72-74.

in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (Jn. 3:14-15). Jesus uses that ancient metaphor from Hebrew literature, knowing that Nicodemus would immediately recall that story from Numbers 21. But what Jesus does with this story is amazing!

A primary emphasis throughout the Gospel of John was that the Gospel of Jesus was superceding the Law of Moses. It was not that the Law was evil; rather, it was the means God used to bring humanity into relationship with him and to work together on creating the shalom community (“kingdom of God”) for humanity. But because those who interpreted and taught and administered the Law used it to secure their own power, prestige, possessions and privilege at the expense of the peasants, they had corrupted the Law beyond redemption. John called these corrupters of the Law the “Judeans” (often translated, “the Jews”) – the religious aristocracy of Israel, which was also the nation’s political and economic aristocracy as well. It is that emphasis which John subtly develops through Jesus’ reference to the serpent in the wilderness.

John places into the Greek of 3:14 an intriguing wordplay, playing on an earlier wordplay that appears in the Hebrew of Numbers 21:9. When John has Jesus say, “just as Moses lifted up the serpent . . . so must the Son of Man be lifted up”, the Greek word John uses for “lift up” is the same Greek word for “exalt”. Moses “lifted up” the bronze serpent so that the Israelites would not die of poisonous snakebites. But God “exalted” Jesus on the cross that brought healing and salvation to the world. Pilate and the “Judeans” (the Jewish aristocracy) sought to eliminate Jesus through crucifixion as an enemy of the state. Instead, what they did was to “exalt” Jesus. The cross became his throne. What the Judeans saw as Jesus’ moment of greatest defeat was, in reality, Jesus’ triumph over sin (even the sin of Pilate and the Judeans) so that “whoever believes in him may have eternal² life” (Jn. 3:15). And that brings us to the second wordplay.

In the Hebrew text of Numbers 21:9, the term “serpent of bronze” is *nehash nekhoshet*, another play on words. It means “serpent of bronze”, that is, the serpent who heals the one who has been bitten. The *nehash nekhoshet* was made by Moses at the command of God in order to provide a way of salvation to repentant Israelites who would otherwise be facing a certain death.

Intriguingly, however, I Kings 18:4 tells us of the *Nekhushtan*, a bronze serpent that stood in the Jerusalem Temple during the reign of Hezekiah and was alleged to have been the actual sculpture struck by Moses. King Hezekiah had it destroyed because it had become an idol to the Jews – a pole that had once brought salvation in its wake, but now was being worshipped by the Jews and thus diverting them from obedience to Yahweh.

Thus, Jesus is saying to Nicodemus and John is saying to his readers, “Don’t expect the Law of Moses to save you.” Just as the *Nekhushtan* was used by the religious leaders of Hezekiah’s Temple to lead Israel to turn the *nehash nekhoshet* into an idol, so Israel’s religious, political and economic leaders will lead you astray if you place your trust in them. The only savior upon whom you can truly depend is neither a bronze serpent nor a Temple but “the Son of Man who has been *lifted up* on a cross and will thus be *exalted* as the redeemer of the world.” “If Moses’

² “Eternal” life in the Gospel of John not only means an ongoing future of the believer with God, but a fulfilled, enriched, meaning-filled, fulfilling life both now and forever in the unending presence of God!

“lifting up” of the serpent gave “life” (Num. 21:9), the “raising up” of Jesus will give “eternal life”.³

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17 introduces Abraham into Paul’s argument that salvation is due to the action of God and not by human action. In his letter to the Church in Rome, Paul is making two arguments that are essential to his theology. First, God’s gospel of transformation is for Gentiles as well as for Jews. Second, this gospel comes through God’s generosity of grace and not by any act of obedience or moral action by humans. Salvation is grace received through faith alone. These issues are crucial to Paul’s argument because Jewish theology at that time believed that salvation was only given by God to the Jews (Gentiles need not apply unless they first became Jews) and was activated by strictly obeying the Law of Moses. In order to bolster his argument, Paul uses the example of Abraham.

In Romans 4:1-5, Paul argues that Abraham was blessed by God and given the promise *before* he acted in obedience to God. That is, God spoke to him, commanded him to move to a land that had not yet been identified, and promised to make him a blessing to the entire world. But Abraham had not yet acted to receive that blessing! First of all, he chose to take God at God’s word and to believe God. Then, based upon his willingness to take God at God’s word, Abram then chose to act. Belief had to precede action in order for any action to occur! And, Paul stressed, it was the belief that the author of Genesis chooses as that which brought new life to Abram, not the action that ensued from it. The author of Genesis wrote, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6), not “Abraham acted upon God’s instruction, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness”. Thus, Paul argues, it was the grace of God appropriated by Abraham and not his works that made Abraham right before God. Rather, his works (in the case of Gen. 12, his literal moving of his family from Haran and their journey toward Canaan) were the clear manifestation to God of Abraham’s trust in a God who was always graceful to him.

Likewise, God’s promise did not go to a Jew but to a Gentile, for Abram was no Jew when God called him out of Haran. In fact, one could argue that it was not until Abram became Abraham and Sarai became Sarah, and the covenant was clearly established between Abraham and God that he truly became patriarch of the people who eventually became Jews. Thus, Paul argues the importance of Genesis 12:3 and 17:5, both of which indicate that Abraham is the spiritual father of many nations (i.e., the Gentiles) and not just of the Jews, for it is through embracing the faith of an Abraham that the entire world finds blessing for itself.

Paul thus summarizes his argument in Romans 4:13-17, stressing that Abraham was promised to be the father, not only of Israel, but of a multitude of people, a blessing to all nations. His “gospel” was a gospel intended for the entire world. For it was a gospel, not of winning heaven by the force of one’s good works or obedience to the Law of Moses, but of being granted heaven by a gracious God who loves us and wants us to receive his blessings through our response of faith that is manifested by our willingness to “set out, not knowing where (we) are going” (Heb. 11:8).

³ Wes Howard-Brook, *Becoming Children of God: John’s Gospel and Radical Discipleship* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1994), p. 91.

Why was it so important to Paul to win his case so overwhelmingly? It was because the whole future of the Christian faith depended upon his effective argument of this issue. As pointed out in the Gospel commentary for today, “It was not that the Law was evil; rather it was the means God used to bring humanity into relationship with him. But because those who interpreted and taught and administered the Law used it to secure their own power, prestige, possessions and privilege at the expense of the people, they had corrupted the Law beyond redemption”. Israel’s “powers that be” had so usurped the Law for their own purposes that there was no longer any understanding of the Law other than what the authorities were now interpreting it to be – an interpretation that pressed out of it all that it had ever contained of grace and freedom and inclusivity in favor of a religion of obedience, religious endorsement of the current power structure and exclusion of any non-Jew from the faith.

Under Israel’s rulers of the day, the Law had become politically oppressive, economically exploitive and religiously controlling rather than being the spiritually liberating, just, economically equitable and relational work of God for the transformation of the entire world it was created to be. Therefore, Paul could argue its abolition only by proving that the founder of the people of Israel, Abraham, had been transformed by God’s grace 600 to 800 years before there was any Law, and had been blessed in order to be a blessing to the entire world. By winning that case, Paul believed that he could open Israel to Jesus, not only as Messiah but as the Son of God who had become God’s graceful means for the salvation of each person and the return of society to the world as God had always intended it to be. That is why he argued it with such fervor and determination. That he essentially won this argument among Christians shaped the future of the Church as it became independent of the powers of Israel and of the Law as they interpreted it.

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