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Genesis 12:1-7 & John 3:1-17

“God’s Redeeming Love”

March 5, 2023 – Rocky River Presbyterian Church

Lent 2 – Year A

Genesis 12:1-7

¹Now 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. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I 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.” ⁴So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. ⁵Abram 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; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, ⁶Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him.

John 3:1-17

¹Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He 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.” ³Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” ⁴Nicodemus 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?” ⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is Spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸The 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.” ⁹Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹“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. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶“For God so loved the world that God gave the only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷“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 is the Word of the Lord **Thanks be to God**

“God’s Redeeming Love”

As I have said before, I did not grow up in the church – I visited a lot with my friends, so my religious education was pretty spotty. The first verse I ever memorized though, was John 3:16 – I didn’t learn this in church though. I learned this from the rare occasions when I would watch football on tv with my family. I would be bored, so, I spent my time looking at the signs that I could see in the stands. There, I would see the homemade signs that read JOHN 3:16 in big bold letters. I never knew what it meant, or why those people felt it was so important hold those signs out there for everyone to see. I mean, it’s not like they were cheering for their team or anything. I asked my parents. They had no idea what John 3:16 meant other than to say, *“That’s some quote from the Bible.”* That was enough to get me out of having to watch football. I went and got the big, huge dust-covered family bible my parents were given for their wedding. It lived on a bookshelf next to the 8-track cassettes. I looked up John 3:16.

*“For God so loved the world that God gave God’s only son,
so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.”*

For God so loved the world - the world. I remember, as a child reading this passage, “The world” was the part that clung to my heart. For God so loved the world. Not, for God so loved Christians; not, for God so loved white people; not, for God so loved conservative people or liberal people, or church people, or rich people, or straight people... John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the WORLD.”

Later, as I listened to some Christians use John 3:16 as shorthand to whip up a certain kind of religious fervor, I could not understand how I could have read it so differently. Because I remember reading John 3:16 but then continuing into John 3:17 which for me was even more consequential:

*¹⁷“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.*

God isn’t about condemnation, judgement, or hate. God is about saving, redeeming, loving. John 3:16-17 offers a powerful theological rationale for why God sent Jesus into the world. God loves the world. To the first readers of John’s Gospel, this perspective is stunning because they believed the attitudes and behaviors of the world were contrary to God. According to everyday logic, God should be angry with the world and punish it. Yet, God loves the world. For John, love includes a dimension of feeling but understands love in a bigger way – love includes actions for the good of the other and the community. Love is a decision of the will. God **loves** the world, so God consequently acts for the good of the world. God’s action is to give Jesus.¹

The scope of God’s redeeming love is not a New Testament idea – it is well documented in scripture. To underline this truth the creators of our lectionary paired today’s reading of John with the calling of Abram and Sarai in Genesis 12.

¹ Working Preaching – March 5, 2023 – Ronald Allen, Professor Emeritus of Preaching, and Gospels and Letters, Christian Theological Seminary.

In the first 11 chapters of the book of Genesis we see again and again how God chooses to be in relationship with humanity. We see those same chosen people act for their own purposes, act selfishly to get what they want or feel they deserve. Again and again, we see God's anger and disappointment over these actions, and we begin to wonder what God is going to do. The answer comes in Genesis 12. God does not abandon humankind, but instead God decides on blessing as an alternative to curse.

²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I 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 12:2-3)

The call and promise are made to Abram and Sarai. These are not the most obvious choice to receive God's blessing - from the world's standards there are much better candidates. The text has already told us that this couple is already "*long in the tooth*" – maybe have more than their fair share of grey hairs, if you will. In addition, the text has already told us that Sarai is barren, so how will they become a great nation?

These verses in Genesis make it clear that this choice is God's alone – this relationship has nothing to do with the characteristics of the people chosen, but rather about the nature of the One doing the choosing. In these few lines we learn what it means to be God's chosen people. The whole point of being God's chosen people has to do with **God's** decision to use special agents to bring blessings to the broader human family.

When you keep reading Genesis you see that Abram, Sarai, and their offspring certainly became the occasion for blessing, bringing prosperity and health for those among whom they settled. At other times though as when they pretended to be siblings rather than spouses, they instead brought trouble to the neighborhood. This view of blessing hangs on a single theological premise: God chooses to remain intimately connected to humanity. God may grieve and even rant over the incessant evil that humankind dreams up in every generation, but given the nature of God's commitment, God will not quit on the chosen agents of blessing. And inevitably, such faithfulness on God's part means that God will suffer all the pain and sorrow that this troubled relationship generates.

God makes a choice and is faithful to that choice – even to the point of birthing Jesus, God's own child, into the world – not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

This is where most of us, like Nicodemus, from the Gospel of John, are left scratching our heads. Good ole Nic was a pharisee – a member of the Jewish establishment – who sneaks out to talk with Jesus in the dark of night. Even though he is afraid of being found out by his peers, he is moved to try and understand who Jesus really is and what Jesus is about. When Jesus is talking about being born from above or being born again Nicodemus was so confused - wondering how are you supposed to make that happen? Good old Nic, such a concrete thinker...

How were you supposed to be born again if you are older? There's no way we are going back into the womb at that point. How can you be born again when it is a challenge just to get out of bed in the morning?

Frederick Buechner described being born again this way - imagine a fire in the fireplace, you've thrown too much fresh wood on the dying embers hoping that it will revive and light up the room with its warmth. The pile of wood is a little overcrowded and in need of some oxygen when a gust of wind happens to whistle down the chimney making the dying embers burst into flame. Jesus says that being born again is like that. It's not something you do. The wind does it. The Spirit does it. It is something that happens from above - because of God's actions.²

We are born again, not because of our belief, or anything WE do – we are born again because of God – God's choice, God's action.
I know this goes against what many of us have been taught.

Many theologians and Christians interpret this passage, especially John 3:16, as a command: Be born again! Make your commitment! Believe in Jesus!

Where this passage changed for me, where it invited me deeper into relationship with God and neighbor, was when I began to understand it as an invitation. Jesus is inviting Nicodemus to let God work in his life. Jesus is inviting Nicodemus to see that God sent Jesus into the world in order for all of us to see the commitment of God to redeem and reclaim and bless all people everywhere – to redeem, reclaim, and bless the World. In John's gospel, being born from above and believing in Jesus are clearly not so much about what you do with your mind as about what you do with your heart and your life. In John's gospel and in Genesis, believing and doing are inseparable. On this second Sunday of Lent, we are being invited to remember and embody this truth.

**For God so loved the world that God gave God's only son,
God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world,
but in order that the world might be saved through him.**

We are transformed by this reality into bearers of this promise
**so that we will be a blessing
and in all y'all, the families of the earth shall be blessed.**

As we move through this Lenten season, where is Jesus inviting you to allow God's redeeming love to play in your life, to reshape your heart and mind like playdough in the hands of toddlers? And remembering that we are blessed to be a blessing, how is God forming you to share that blessing with others? So that the world around you may experience the redeeming love of God at work in the world?

² Frederick Buechner – Peculiar Treasures: a Biblical Who's Who: Nicodemus, Page 137