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Genesis 12:1-4, John 3:1-17
The Next Verse

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you should like a title for this sermon, I call it “The Next Verse.” I mean John 3:17. All the world cherishes John 3:16, and well we should. It is that golden verse that speaks of God’s love and holds out hope that we should not perish:

¹⁶For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (John 3:16, KJV)

But it seems to me that John 3:17 is a sublime verse too. Here it is, in the good, old King James Version:

¹⁷For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. (John 3:17, KJV)

There has been plenty enough condemning in this world, sometimes even within families. But God does not do it. He did not send his only begotten Son into our world to condemn the world, but to save it. Do you see what I mean? This verse too is a magnificent text.

Let me approach this verse by way of our First Lesson’s story about God’s call of Abram. I would like to look at this story three times round, as if changing levels of magnification on a telescope. First, let’s look at the story from a simple human point of view. It is the story of a man and his wife leaving home. Second, let’s broaden the perspective by looking at the story in relationship to the ancient stories contained in the preceding stories in Genesis. So, we will look at Genesis Chapters 1-11— at the fundamental human stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood, and the story of the Tower of Babel. Finally, let’s consider the story in relationship to God and to the sending of his Son into this world, not to condemn it, but that through Jesus it might be saved.

ABRAM

First, consider the story of Abram and Sarai from a simple human point of view. We meet Abram’s father just a few verses before today’s reading. His name is Terah. We meet some others of Abram’s kindred in those verses – people like his uncle Nahor, his nephew Lot, and some other folks. They all seem like fine

people. We hear no complaint against them. They are all living in a town called Haran, which is the modern land Iraq.

Our reading begins with what must have been momentous words for Abram. The LORD calls upon him to leave his homeland and his kindred:

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. (Genesis 12:1, RSV)

For ancient people this was almost like asking Abram to enter into madness and disorientation. Indeed, there are people even in our modern world who could hardly conceive leaving their hometown and family behind. When Carol and I visited Italy a few years ago, our tour guide was a charming and sophisticated world traveler. But she still lived in the village outside Rome where her family lived and her ancestors before her. She told us that she could not imagine leaving that village. People there do not do that.

But Abram was called to do that. He, along with his wife, Sarai, were called to become emigrants.

And this puts me in mind of a beautiful passage in one of Pastor Raymond Shaheen’s sermons from long ago. You met Pastor Shaheen’s son just a couple Sundays ago, when Pastor David Shaheen was here to help with the baptism of little Catherine Sylvia Rock. So, that was Pastor David. But my pastor when I was growing up was David’s father, Raymond, now of blessed memory. Here is a passage from one of his sermons. It speaks of the human dimension of leaving home behind. Pastor Shaheen said this:

Some years back, in one of television’s better programs, there was a very fine performance of “The Emigrants,” a saga-of-sorts of a Swedish¹ family. The eldest, first born son that he was, had visions of life in the new world called America. The more he was enthralled by what the land across the waters could offer, the less he found appealing in the Old Sweden of his youth.

The time came when he broke the news to his aging father. Some fathers are gifted with a measure of understanding. This father was one of them, who braced himself for the day when he would see his son and his family for the last time.

The son and his family gathered together the limited possessions they would take with them -- a steamer trunk for the children’s things and likewise one for the parents, a suitcase for each to last the journey. These, the trunks and the suitcases, they load on the old cart.

¹ I think Pastor Shaheen called them Norwegian, but they were Swedish.

They make their embraces on the stoop of the homestead where each of them had first seen the light of day. As they climb into the cart, they head for the lane that leads to the road to town: the first leg on their way to the seaport.

On either side of the lane that leads to the road that will take them to town are the surrounding meadows, rich in memories, of course.

Now comes a most poignant scene: above the creaking noise of the wheels of the cart, the old father cups his hands to his lips and calls: “Go slowly as you go through the gate.”

An eloquent summation, indeed, from the depth of his soul. Intended, of course, to be a fervent plea that in going slowly he would think in unforgettable fashion of the stock from which he had stemmed -- of the roots that constitute his heritage - of the land whose soil was intertwined with his very soul - of his father and mother who had taught him so much in the days of his childhood - of his grand-parents whose lengthened shadow had always been cast benignly upon him - whose lasting legacy could be the remembrance of that portion of God’s love which had come to him through them in his baptism and in his confirmation - and all this from a place to which he would never return - - except as one day he might remember - and in remembering, be made strong.

Say it again - let it be echoed and re-echoed: “Go slowly when go through the gate” so that whatever upon which you might reflect will hold you in good stead in the face of all that lies ahead!

And so it was that Abram and Sarai did this thing – they went slowly through the gate, leaving the old man behind, leaving their home and their kindred.

GENESIS I-II

Not, let’s take a second look at this story, this time in relation to the ancient stories of Genesis Chapters 1-11. In each of these stories, we find a divine word of judgment. We find the Lord threatening death and hardship. And the Lord does indeed carry out his judgment. It is just that when the Lord judges, he does not judge quite as we sometime do. In his judgments and the carrying out of his sentence, there always seem to be a kind of window left open. The Lord judges, condemns, and performs his sentence of judgment, and yet the ways of mercy remain in play. It is as if the ways of the Lord are higher than our ways, even when it comes to judgment and punishment.

So, think of Adam and Eve. The warning of the Lord to them was perfectly clear. Do not eat of this particular tree, lest you die:

²And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: ³But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die. (Genesis 3:2-3, KJV)

Did they die? They ate of the forbidden tree, but did they die? Well, yes and no. They did die in the sense that through their sin, death entered the world and they became subject to it. But they did not die in the sense of falling down dead as a doornail right there on the spot. In fact, in a deed of divine tenderness, the Lord made coats of skins for them and clothed them before casting them out of the Garden (Genesis 3:21). More importantly, he promised them that one day he would rid the world of the Tempter who had brought such misery into Paradise:

¹⁴The LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, cursed are you above all cattle, and above all wild animals; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. ¹⁵I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” (Genesis 3:14-15, RSV)

This promise is an early form of Gospel for our earth.

Once Adam and Eve had disobeyed God, murder soon entered the world, with Cain murdering his brother Abel. “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.” Cain’s life should have been forfeit, yet it is the Lord himself who put his protecting mark on Cain (Genesis 4:15). The Lord had warned Cain that his anger was going to get the better of him. “Sin lieth at the door” (Genesis 4:7, KJV). The Lord had warned Cain, Cain had disregarded the warning and killed his brother, Abel, and the Lord pronounced his sentence upon the murderer:

And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand;
(Genesis 4:11, KJV)

So, the Lord curses Cain, but also protects him with his divine mark. Do you see the trend? Our God judges, yes, and executes his sentence, yet also displays mercy.

The story of Noah and the Flood begins with these dreadful words:

⁵And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. ⁶And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart. ⁷And the LORD said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them. (Genesis 6:5-7, KJV)

So, the Lord makes the universal judgment on the earth. Everything is to be destroyed – not only humanity, but also the beasts of the forest, the birds of the air, and the birds of the air. But you know the story, don't you? The compassion of God finds its way in the midst of the judgment, and so the Lord saves Noah and his family and representatives of all the beasts and birds and fish – two by two he saved them. Again, the judgment of the Lord yearns also for salvation.

And now we come to the story just before this morning's story of Abram and Sarai. It is the story of the Tower of Babel. The story begins with the people setting out to be make a name for themselves² by building an immense tower:

⁴And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us *make us a name*, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth. (Genesis 11:4, KJV)

They fail. The Lord stops them. He confuses their language so that they can no longer communicate together and he scatters them upon the face of the earth.

⁷Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. ⁸So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city. (Genesis 11:7-8, KJV)

It is a heavy penalty – one that humanity suffers to this very day. Not only between nations, but also within them and even within families, when we can hardly talk with one another anymore, it tends to break down our communities.

So, Babel suffers this solemn punishment? But where is the mercy that we had seen before? Where is the Lord's compassion burning warmly and bringing its blessing?

Now we come to today's story. The call of Abram and Sarai to leave their home and go where the Lord sends them is the start of the healing of what one

² The importance of their trying to "make a name for themselves" is pointed out by commentator Frank Anthony Spina in *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts, The First Readings: The Old Testament and Acts*.

commentator calls “the Babel Syndrome.”³ The people of Babel wanted to make a name for themselves. Now, the Lord shows the world how that is done.

^{12:1}Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will shew thee: ²And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, *and make thy name great*; and thou shalt be a blessing: ³And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed. (Genesis 12:1-3, KJV)

And so it is that the call of Abram commences the healing of the wound that humanity suffered back in the Garden of Eden.

This repeated pattern of warning, sin, judgment, and hope puts me in mind of a saying about God’s love and his willingness to chastise us:

⁶For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth... (Hebrews 12:6, KJV)

Our anger and punishment can seek to rebuke and hurt. We can lose our way in our wrath, so that our chastisement is borne along by the desire to humiliate or crush someone. But the chastisement of the Lord never loses its way. It is always carried along by love and by the desire to save.

JOHN 3:17

And this brings us back to John 3:17. If the call of Abram commences the blessing of humanity after the calamity of the Tower of Babel, the sending of God’s only Son to our earth is the pinnacle and decisive point in that divine mercy. It is the greatest act of mercy our world has ever known. It is the greatest act beyond which there is no need for any other, for it is sufficient to the job.

Saint John is talking about the ultimate kindness and blessing in face of humanity’s failures. The failure of our race are vast, but the Lord’s blessing is even more vast. All we like sheep have gone astray, but the Lord has indeed laid on him the iniquity of our sins:

⁶All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:6, RSV)

Something grand is afoot in the stories of Lent. We watch Jesus as he moves toward Golgotha and the Cross. But this is not simply the story of one more death

³ Frank Anthony Spina, *The Lectionary Commentary on the First Readings*.

in our world. Rather, it is the story of God's compassion and willingness to forgive and to save reaching its pinnacle.

How often have I talked with someone who is burdened with guilt over sins they have committed in the course of their life. How often I have heard them ask, "How can God ever forgive me?" We all have regrets – things we have done or neglected to do. They weigh us down and cause us to fear the judgment and condemnation of God. But listen again to these lovely words, and in listening be encouraged.⁴

¹⁷For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. (John 3:17, KJV)

And to this Son be the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

⁴ I took this fine paragraph from my wife, Carol's, sermon for today.