

2 Lent, Year A

Genesis 12:1-4a

Psalm 121

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

John 3:1-17

The only person I've ever known who I think got the whole "giving stuff up for Lent" thing right was my friend James. James is now a priest living in Texas, but when we were in seminary, I asked him that inane question we Episcopalians often ask one another around this time of year: "James, what are you giving up for Lent?"

James got quiet for a minute, then said, "I think I'm giving up God."

"Uh, James?" I replied. "Maybe we shouldn't tell the dean of the seminary about that one, buddy."

"No," he said. "What I mean is I've got all these preconceived notions in my head about what God is like: what he looks like, what he wants, how he speaks. And some of them are really good. But this Lent I'm asking him for the grace of being able to put those aside. Whenever I talk to God or think about God this Lent, I'm asking him to show me something new about himself, to show me something of his fullness in a way I haven't seen yet. That's the grace I'm asking for."

Y'all, *that's* a fast. Forget coffee, Coca-Cola, and cussin'. *That's* a fast.

What my friend James knew—and what he taught me—is that sometimes we have to give up what we think we know in order for God to reveal who he truly is.

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We see this great truth writ large across our scriptures this morning.

Consider Abram. When we meet Abram in today's Old Testament reading (before God has renamed him Abraham), he is seemingly the least likely candidate to garner positive attention from God. He is from Ur of the Chaldeans, a place that, at the time, was given to moon-worship and

devotion to multiple deities.¹ His wife Sarai was barren,² which was seen in that time and culture as a curse upon the whole family. He was an unknown—a nobody—living his life according to the only knowledge he had.

Then BAM! Enter God:

“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.’”³

Do you see what God is doing here? Do you see the magnitude? God comes into Abram’s life—seemingly from out of nowhere—and says:

“You who have no nationI will make of you a great nation.

You who are cursedI will bless you.

You who are a nobodyI will make your name great.

And why should this be? So that *you will be a blessing* to countless generations yet to come.”

Imagine what it would have been like for Abram to receive this revelation from God . . . a god whom he’d never even heard of before. The simple, startling fact is that Abram did *nothing* to earn this. Abram and Sarai had *nothing* to contribute to this prospect.⁴ Of his own divine generosity, God simply *gave* Abram his favor, that all the world would be blessed in return. All Abram could offer in return was his willing “okay,” and that “okay” was faith enough upon which to build a covenant. As Paul says in his letter to the Romans, “Abraham believed God, and it was

¹ Clay, A.T. “Ur Of The Chaldees.” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015. Bible Study Tools. Web. 7 March 2017.

² Genesis 11:30

³ Genesis 12:1-2

⁴ Smith, Jacob. “Episode 17: Blessing, Belief and New Birth.” Audio blog post. Same Old Song. Mockingbird, 7 March 2017. Web. 8 March 2017.

reckoned to him as righteousness.”⁵ Abram had to give up what he thought he knew in order for God to reveal who he truly is. And in doing so, God’s blessings poured forth.

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Now, fast-forward to today’s Gospel reading. Thousands of years later, a Pharisee named Nicodemus comes to Jesus under the cover of night. As a Pharisee, it was Nicodemus’ job to know as much as possible about God; he was in the God knowledge business. Intrigued by Jesus—though not enough to come in the broad light of day—Nicodemus comes and says, “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.”⁶

Jesus responds as if to say, “Oh Nicodemus, don’t try to butter me up. Your pretty words won’t work on me. Do you want to see the kingdom of God? Then you must be born again.” Nicodemus is perplexed and can’t see past the metaphor. He ponders aloud, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?”⁷ He just doesn’t get it.

About this, someone I met this week said, “The problem with Nicodemus is that Jesus was speaking ‘heavenese.’ All Nicodemus knew was ‘earthese,’ ‘humanese,’ ‘pharisee-ese.’ He just couldn’t understand.”⁸ As with my friend James, as with Abram, as with all the rest of us, Jesus was saying, “Nicodemus, you think you know so much, but don’t you see? Don’t you understand? It’s not about what you know. It’s about what God can make of you. Nicodemus, sometimes you have to give up what you think you know in order for God to reveal who he truly is.”

⁵ Romans 4:3

⁶ John 3:2

⁷ John 3:4

⁸ Babson, Bibs. Personal communication. Trinity Episcopal Cathedral. Columbia, SC. 8 March 2017.

As Nicodemus continues to struggle, Jesus lays it out: “Nicodemus, do you remember that time in the desert when our forebears, the people of Israel, were being attacked by serpents? Do you remember how they cried out and pleaded for Moses to deliver them? And how God instructed Moses to make a bronze serpent and set it atop a pole, that whosoever looked upon it and believed would be healed and live?⁹ Well, Nicodemus, God is about to do one better.

“The day is coming, Nicodemus, when God will set not a snake atop a pole, but his only begotten Son. The day is coming when *I* will be lifted high upon a pole, a pillar, a post, that whosoever looks upon *me* and believes will be delivered . . . not just from any ordinary snake bite, but from the bite of that great Serpent all those years ago in Eden.”

And as if that weren’t enough, he concludes with that most famous of all verses, the summation of the entire Gospel: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”¹⁰

I read this week where someone took that verse and made its meaning clear with startling beauty and simplicity:

For GodThe greatest subject ever
 so (much)The greatest extent ever
 loved.....The greatest affection ever
 the worldThe greatest object ever
 that he gave his only begotten Son,The greatest gift ever
 that whosoeverThe greatest opportunity ever
 believeth in himThe greatest commitment ever
 should not perishThe greatest rescue ever
 but have everlasting lifeThe greatest promise ever¹¹

⁹ Numbers 21:6-9

¹⁰ John 3:16

¹¹ Bruner, Frederick Dale. *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012. 201.

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More and more it seems we live in a time of great and deceptive certainty, of hubris, of bluster. Ours is an age wherein everyone has a sick need to be seen as strong, as certain, as right. The problem, however, is that when we live this way, we put ourselves firmly in the place of God. No wonder we cannot hear him. No wonder we've lost our capacity for "heavenese."

I don't know what you've "given up" for Lent this year, but I can tell you beyond the shadow of a doubt that there is tremendous grace in giving up what we think we know; in being willing to hear something new; in being open to the revelation and blessing of God even (especially!) when we think we've already got it all well in hand.

The fact of the matter is that God is the one who has "given up" something for us, and he has done so purely out of love. Like Abram and Sarai, we have done nothing to earn it. Like them, we contribute nothing to the prospect. There is only one gift we have to offer in return, and it is simply this: to look up—to look upon the Son lifted high upon that pole—and live.

Amen.