

Sermon: Year A, II Lent

Texts: Genesis 12:1-4a

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

John 3:1-17

Our Book of Common Prayer makes recommendations for texts that can be read at marriage ceremonies. One of these is from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, and I can tell you with utter certainty that in my eighteen years of being a priest, no one has ever selected this passage for their service. It begins with these simple words: "Wives, be subject to your husbands." I wish I could show you the look on the faces of couples as they quickly dismiss this text. Sometimes it's beyond words. And being beyond words, it makes no difference what comes after this infamous line. It doesn't matter that the rest of the passage is a beautiful song about modeling to one another Christ's love for us, which includes Paul's plea that husband's be devoted to their wives to the same degree that Christ was devoted to us – giving one's whole life. It doesn't matter. The damage has been done. The text has been irreparably tainted by centuries of misuse and abuse. So it has fallen to silence.

The text read this morning from John, I think, shares something of the same taint. Karl Barth claimed that one of the most destructive questions we can ask as Christians is whether one "has been saved or not" – or, in the parlance so prevalent now, whether one has been "born again." With striking succinctness he simply stated that this is a "terrifically bad question," which he spent much of his life trying to dismantle, however he could. He did so because at the most fundamental level this short phrase misconstrues the whole Christian faith, and when this question becomes the central concern of the church – as in so many places it has – then almost everything that follows becomes terribly warped.

Here is the crux of the problem. When we ask about being saved, when this is the question that leads our faith, then our most essential message is based in fear and threat. "Are you saved?" These three words suddenly place us in a most precarious position. They presume that we are at risk. We are in danger. And, in the religious extension of this question, we are informed that our lives are teetering not only on the very edge of death, but of eternal judgment as well. Our fate is in our hands, and unless we choose to believe... and repent... and obey... we will suffer infinite calamity, from which there will be no respite. The question confronts us.

Many have contended that there is a dividing line, certain and true, between right and wrong, good and evil, life and death, and it has been left to us to decide whether we will act quickly to secure ourselves against God's condemnation, whether we will turn and humbly acknowledge his grace. Our punishment looms before us. It awaits us, unless we fall at the foot of the cross. Isn't this often how Christianity is presented... and perhaps not unsurprisingly. Because fear is a compelling force. It has been America's most public face for the last seven years. Fearful ourselves, we have done whatever it takes to be fearsome instead. Victory comes best and is made most clear by means of someone else's defeat. Threat provides a powerful incentive for radical action, which is all the more the case when it is extended ad infinitum, when, at the last, there will come a point of absolute reckoning. "Are you saved?"

Don't you see how much danger lurks in the nearest shadow, waiting to pounce? Don't you see how you are dangling above an awful abyss?

We are provided no comfortable space by such a question. This is about us. It's about our lives, our wellbeing, our haunted consciences, our buried guilt, our drive for acceptance, for approval, for security. The question is an unforgiving mirror. It shows us all our faults. If you've ever been accosted by someone hurling this question at you, you probably know how intrusive it can feel. Because it puts you on the spot. Just beneath the supposed concern there lies a stinging accusation. And God, then, becomes the means by which this accusation gains its maximum force.

The story of Nicodemus is very instructive here, because what it really says – now, quite apart from the very way it has been woefully misread – is that being born again is actually none of our business. Period. And every attempt to make religion powerful by means of fear and threat is both abominable and false.

John tells us that Nicodemus, a Pharisee, sought out Jesus under the cover of night. Nicodemus wanted to find out how Jesus might fit within the logic of the world he already knew. He had realized that Jesus could not be safely ignored, so, quietly, he inquired of Jesus what relation he planned to have to the law, the temple, and all the many rules of life by which the Pharisees maintained public order and national identity. Their law kept the peace. Their rituals placed the nation within the good pleasure of God. The Pharisees guarded Israel from curse and destruction. What, then, he asked, was Jesus intending?

Jesus' reply, as the text makes almost comically clear, was utterly outside Nicodemus' ability to comprehend. And it was so because the coming of the kingdom of God had almost nothing to do with any of the structures of regulated behavior upon which Nicodemus had learned to depend. It didn't entail doing things correctly and thereby attaining one's own favor. What Jesus declared was that God's grace was being given in spite of all the laws of the Pharisees. It was being extended from outside their circle because God's promise and mercy is wholly gratuitous. It had come, but it had come only and exclusively in Jesus, himself, for in him God was fully present. He was the one, the only one, who was born from above. Being "born again" is a phrase that never refers to our decision for our own salvation. It's sole reference is to Jesus, as the one who by incarnation has revealed to all the world the heart of God. It is this one birth, Barth said, that has overturned everything.

Jesus changes everything because after him threat and fear can remain only as the chief signs of our deeply embedded sinfulness. God has acted on behalf of the world – conclusively. God's kindness is not a matter of our decision about who we will be. It was God's own decision, free and unconditional. And our calling is not to worry about the condition of our own goodness as much as it is to revel in the inestimable depths of God's love, which has no limit and, in the end, as our end, will not refuse us. Faith never requires our groveling – not even in Lent. It's the exuberance of proclaiming that God's passion is communion, no matter the cost. Victory comes not by means of defeat but by God's embrace even of those who most proudly claim to be enemies.

We have no message if it is not first and always joy. This is the singular insistence of John's Gospel. And we can have precious little joy when the preoccupation of our faith is fretting over ourselves or pointing out the judgment that is descending upon others. If our witness concerns ourselves, then we have already diverted our gaze away from what is central. Faith looks to God precisely in the manner by which *God has looked to us...* with singular devotion. And as Karl Barth never tired of saying, what we find there, in Jesus, is a love that rejects condemnation, that never ceases to find delight and never shies away from embrace, no matter the intensity of the evil that stands in the way.

So let's get this right. It is not we who are born again; rather, we have all been taken into the life of Christ; as Christians, we are sealed in Christ's baptism and are bound together in God's communion. When we live within this recognition what opens is faith and hope and love, which make God's kingdom present now, ahead of time. *Ad-venturam*. This is our adventure. What we as the church have to offer the world is not our judgment against it, but the same gift that God has offered us, such passion for others that we cease to worry about ourselves.

This is a profoundly ethical turn. Five more students died suddenly this week at Northern Illinois University, victims again of a uniquely American pathology. Little has been said, if it is known, about the motivations of the gunman. But the form of this violence, repeating what has been done before, serves as a horrible icon, showing us the conviction that lies deepest in our culture: which is judgment. What lies *at the end* is judgment. What *constitutes our end* is judgment. Victory comes by means of defeat, *rendering judgment* that can be explosively executed. Even despair seeks such satisfaction, in revenge, in absolute control, in a deadly decisiveness that, once wrought, cannot be changed. As Shakespeare had King Lear cry over his daughter's dead body: "And thou, no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more, never, never, never, never, never."

People will gather again to talk again about added prevention and amended procedures, which is, I suppose, necessary. But what needs to be talked about most is what is often most assiduously avoided and will not be discussed and will therefore fall to silence. "Behold," said Jesus. Look! See this! "Behold, I am with you always, *even unto the end* of the ages." At the end, as an end, it is not judgment we face; it's companionship. And our calling is not, then, to impose on others a terrifically bad question, "Have you been born again?" but in its place to offer a spectacularly beautiful vision, made incarnate in us. God so loves the world... ever, ever, ever, ever, ever.

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