

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT | MARCH 5, 2023

GENESIS 12:1-4a | PSALM 121 | ROMANS 4:1-5, 13-17 | JOHN 3:1-17

There's a device optometrists use called a phoropter. (Yes, I had to look up what this was called.) It's the big thing on the swivel arm that has all these different lenses on it. And at first, the optometrist tries out lenses with very obvious differences. Is A better? Or B? And eventually, you go on and on and the differences get smaller and smaller. Is X better? Or Y? X again. What about Z? And eventually you get a lens that works.

But when you get up from the chair, what do you see? Not just one lens by itself, but three or four stacked on top of each other. And the most important lens isn't the one at the very end. It's the one at the very beginning. That's the one that shapes how you see everything else.

It's the same way when we read scripture together. We read scripture through scripture. We sometimes call this the "canon within the canon."¹ That within the canon, the list of the books of the Bible, there is another canon, stories and writings that are of great theological importance. And those texts and stories shape our understanding of everything else. They are sort of like the first lens you put on that you read everything else through.

Having a canon within a canon doesn't mean that we throw out anything we don't like. This is what Thomas Jefferson did to his Bible when he just cut out the parts he didn't like. You can check our pew Bibles, and we haven't done this. On the other hand, it doesn't mean that we hold everything in the Bible to be of the same weight and importance. That's what Biblical literalists claim to do (but don't actually do). It simply means that we read scripture through scripture.

Today, we heard two stories, one from Genesis and one from St. John's gospel, both of which are fundamental for everything else that we encounter in scripture. In fact, you could make an argument that you should do all of your theological reading and thinking and living with these two texts in mind. They are the "first lens" you want to put on.²

So let's start with today's gospel text. Nicodemus, this leader of the Pharisees, comes to see Jesus at night. Night is, in John's gospel of binaries, a symbol of ignorance. But Nicodemus isn't totally in the dark. He understands something about Jesus. He calls him "Rabbi" and "teacher." He recognizes that he's done signs. He even says that Jesus must have "come from God." So far, so good.

But then things start to break down in their conversation, and we have this series of misunderstandings and double meanings. And the most important one comes in verses three and four. Jesus says that we must be born *anōthen*, which has two meanings. "Again," which is about sequence, and "from above," which is about source. Nicodemus comes back and asks how someone can be born *deuteros*. Unlike *anōthen*, *deuteros* only has one meaning, which is about sequence.

And this seems to be the problem. Because Nicodemus is really good at taking in new information, sequencing it, thinking about hard questions, offering wise opinions. But his categories, his definitions, his organizing principles have gotten too rigid. And what Nicodemus can't seem to grasp is that you can't analyze or organize or systematize your way into the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God has to be received. Or as Jesus says, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not

¹ There's a fun discussion of this in Timothy J. Wengert, *Reading the Bible with Martin Luther: An Introductory Guide* (Baker Academic, 2013).

² For Lutherans, Romans is usually the center of the canon. But you get similar themes in both of these readings, especially Genesis (which is why Paul talked about it so much in Romans).

know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” The kingdom of God is given.

This is the problem for Nicodemus. Because Nicodemus may be many things. Many good things, in fact. He may be a scholar. An expert. A leader. He can construct vast theological systems to hash out tough problems. But the one thing he does not think of himself as is a receiver.

And that’s the root of the problem. Because Jesus isn’t simply here to tell us about God in theory or God in the abstract or anything else we can hold at an arm’s length. But Jesus is here to tell us about God *for us*. We can speak of God and be in relationship with God and love God only because God has addressed us and created a relationship with us and loved us first.

So this is the first lens you can take with you. Whenever we encounter God in scripture, we start not with what we think about God in general. We think about God *for us*.

But that’s not where this ends. If it was simply God for us, then God’s action could be an excuse to become more parochial, more insular, and more self-centered. And that’s not going to cut it. We see the second, equally necessary lens in today’s Hebrew Bible reading. In this story, God creates a new covenant with Abram. God addresses him with a series of promises. “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.” God creates faith in Abraham. And sure enough, Abram leaves his home, all he knows, all that’s familiar, and goes to a new place. And God does the exact same with us. God creates faith that gives us the courage to leave behind the familiar to follow God’s calling into the world.

But notice something more. Pay attention to why God makes this covenant with Abram. God makes this covenant, the author tells us, “so that [Abram] will be a blessing.” God for us so that. Whenever God acts for us, when God creates faith in us, that grace never stops with us. It’s always oriented toward our neighbors and the life of God’s creation.

We don’t just know this intellectually, but we live this every day. After all, who is blessed by Abram’s faith? All of us. And not just Christians but our Jewish and Muslim neighbors as well. God made a covenant with Abram so that we could come to faith and trust in God’s promises. And it’s the same way with us. God creates faith in us not just so that we have an easier time getting through life but so that our lives become a blessing, a source of hope and inspiration, in the lives of our neighbors.

God *for us so that* is our canon within the canon. It’s the central principle that defines our life together as God’s people. This principle clarifies how Christ is present for us in the scriptures. I just gave you two examples of that. And whenever we read scripture together in worship, that should always be the question you’re trying to answer. How is God acting for us so that we can act for others? This principle illuminates how God works through our liturgy. It’s not just *The body of Christ*. It’s *The body of Christ given for you so that you can be the body of Christ for others*. It’s not just *You’re forgiven*. It’s *In Jesus Christ, God forgives us all our sins God so that we can seek reconciliation in our own relationships and communities*. And that principle is what structures and enlivens our common mission. God assembles us as a communion of faith so that we can inspire, strengthen, and give hope to our neighbors. God draws us together so that we can be church for others.

God *for us so that*. It’s divine grace and public witness brought together in the body of Christ.

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