

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Second Sunday in Lent • March 8, 2020

Genesis 12:1-4a • Psalm 121 • Romans 4:1-5, 13-17 • John 3:1-17

If there's one phrase you hear from this pulpit more than any other, it's probably this: "To understand today's reading, it helps to have a little bit of context." It's almost a cliché. To understand today's reading, you need to know what came immediately before or immediately after. If you got confused during that forty verse reading, let me clarify things by offering you another twenty verses.

Today's reading from Genesis seems like a good example of this. It begins, "The LORD said to Abram..." Okay. Slow down. How to God and Abram know each other? What is their relationship like? What have they talked about in the past? This would be a good time to drop a "To understand today's reading, it helps to have a little bit of context." Except there is no context. This is it. There is nothing in chapter eleven of Genesis that is going to help us make sense of this story. Abram is in chapter eleven, but he's just named as a person. Which means God and Abram have no personal relationship. They have never spoken before. There is no context for any of this.

That's the point. There is no setup for this conversation. There is no moment in chapter eleven where Abram says, "I'd really like to have a conversation with God, so I'm going to do some praying on my own and see what happens." Abram never tries to cajole God down from the heavens. The conversation God and Abram have in today's reading is not the result of anything Abram has done. In confirmation, we call that kind of religion "up religion." Up religion says that you have to do something to be in relationship with God. You have to come to church. You have to behave the right way. You have to be a certain kind of person. If God is going to speak to you, you have to put a little bit of work in ahead of time.

But this story of Abram is the paradigmatic example of "down religion." "Down religion" which is what we (hopefully) teach and practice here, says that God comes to us. Your relationship with God isn't the result of your choice. It's the result of God's choice. You don't have to do anything to be in relationship with God because God comes to us. What was Abram doing before God called him? We don't know. Which is the author's way of telling us that it doesn't matter. Because it's about God coming to him.

Down religion is all about promises. Promises with no logic, no precursor, no setup, no context. For Abram, "I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." For us, "You are a child of God." "This is my body." "Today you will be with me in paradise." "I am with you always." This promise creates a new reality, a new thing for us to trust in. God was, is now, and ever shall be interested in creating something where there was nothing before.

This is different than how many people think about God in the Hebrew Bible. There's a kind of latent anti-Semitism in many of our readings of scripture that believes that in the Hebrew Bible, God just gave people lots of laws and was very angry all the time. And then in the New Testament, God changed his [sic] mind, started over, and was really nice all the time. Old Testament was God of wrath. New Testament is God of love.

But this way of reading scripture only makes sense if you don't read scripture. The Hebrew Bible readings we hear in this season of Lent are all about God coming to us to create a new reality out of nothing. Last week, we heard one of the creation stories where God forms humanity. This week, we heard God's covenant with Abraham and the making of a new people. In a couple weeks, we'll hear God bringing new life from dry bones. What we see is a God who comes to us again and again with no context, no setup, no prelude to bring us new life.

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

In fact, there's an interesting example of this in today's reading from Romans. St. Paul is trying to figure out the relationship between Jews and early Christ followers. And when he tries to come up with the figure who represents the heart of Judaism, who does he choose? Not Moses the lawgiver. That's probably who most of us would think of. He chooses Abraham. Abraham who God considered righteous, not because he acted righteously (up religion), but because he had faith in God's promises (down religion). People often assume that the Jesus is God starting over and now Jews have to convert into the church, which is God's Plan B, to find salvation. St. Paul says something else. That Jesus is God's word opening the circle of God's people even wider. In other words, the word of promise that came to Abraham is the same word made flesh in Jesus.

The promise God gives Abram is what? It's land. It's descendants. But it's more than that. God promises to make Abram a blessing. God promises that Abram, whose life is so uninteresting that the author of Genesis finds it is not worth reporting on, will be someone of universal significance. That the world will benefit not simply because of his land or his kids. But because of who he is as a person. When Abram trusts that God will make him a blessing to others, when he takes that first step away from his family ties and his land and his old hopes toward God's promised future, everything changes. Not just for Abram. But for all creation.

This is part of why the concept of Abrahamic faiths is so important to us. When we talk about Jews, Christians, and Muslims being Abrahamic faiths, we're not just saying that if you go way back we have a common ancestor. (Who cares?) We're claiming that we have been grafted together by an act of God that was not our choice. When we talk about Abrahamic faiths, we're not talking about genealogy. We're talking about God's promise. To be a part of an Abrahamic faith tradition, is to be a child of God's promise.

To be part of an Abrahamic faith, to be a part of that grand sweeping story, is to be the recipient of the faith of the people who came before you. And it is also to recognize yourself as a blessing for other people. Not that your money is a blessing. Not that your time is a blessing. Not that your service is a blessing. But that *you* are a blessing. What the world needs is not just your money or your time or your service or your ideas. What the world needs is you. You are someone's blessing.

That's why every week, we end our liturgy with the same word that God spoke to Abraham. And, as it just so happens, the same word that God speaks in Jesus. "Go." Leave what you know, leave what feels familiar, leave what feels comfortable. Go not to find your salvation. But go to bring that word of promise to someone else.

As I was planning the liturgy for this week, I was looking for prayers from the countries on our prayer cycle, this week they're the Scandinavian countries, and I came across this blessing from Hans Olav Moerk who works at the Church City Mission in Oslo, Norway.

"Go! Go in haste! Never stop walking out of the church room, out from peace and tranquility, into the noise and discomfort, out, to laughter and tears. Carry with you the living bread, as a treasure in your hands and your heart. Share it over and over again. It will always be enough, as long as you continue to break it."

The living bread, of course, is all of us. All of us who are wearied by the trials of life. All of us who are unsure if we have anything worthwhile to offer. All of us who, just like Abram, find that after all our searching for God, God has come to us.

So go. That living bread will always be enough, as long as you continue to break it.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor