

Church of the Good Shepherd and St. John the Evangelist

2nd Lent
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Israel and the Hebrew people could trace their ancestry back 2400 years before Christ. Their history began with the person of Abraham. Abraham was the Father of the Nation and such an important figure that when Jews mention their God, they always identified him as the God of Abraham.

Abraham first appears in Chapter 12 of the Book of Genesis. What follows is a long saga in the form of a journey. In and through it, Abraham comes to the realization that there is but one God. Hebrew writers are at pains to point out, however, that it is God who chooses Abraham and not the other way about. Both Jews and Christians agreed that the story of man's salvation begins with Abraham. It begins with the blessing of Abraham and a promise that God makes that he will become the Father of a great nation. Up until this moment Creation has been cursed since the moment Adam and Eve were driven from the garden, all has lay in ruin and darkness. The promise to Abraham is the first glimmer in the long road to salvation.

Paul in the letter to the Romans chapter 4 takes up this theme. He has been grappling with a dilemma. It is an argument between Jew and Christian. The Jews insist that Christians are not children of Abraham nor are they heirs to his promise. They argue that Christians do not keep the law and without that they can never be in the right with God.

Paul refutes this argument by saying that in that case Abraham himself would not qualify as being righteous because he came before the law. "Abraham," said Paul "was in God's favor because of his faith." "It is this same faith," Paul says, "that Christians share."

All of us are a big part of this argument. We encounter it everyday of our lives. "Who belongs and who does not belong?"

In 1861 Abraham Lincoln put forward a suggestion that the American government should pay \$400 to buy back each and every slave living in the south. His Christian faith told him that there is only one humanity and that Jesus the Christ came for all men.

I deliberately used that exclusive language because in 1861 women did not have a vote nor a say in government. It was not till 57 years later that Congress condescended to give half the American population the vote. Despite that, the state of the Union comes around each year to visually remind us that too few women occupy seats in either House of government.

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Who belongs and who does not? Still exists in our society today. Blank, white, old, fat or thin discrimination rules from TV to advertising from schools to golf clubs.

Jesus in John's Gospel today has a new vision for humanity. He suggests that we take the whole of human existence and we throw it back into the melting pot. He suggests, a new beginning, a new creation. He suggests that people be born again.

Nicodemus is dumb-founded. What could this man possibly mean? He had come, risking great danger, and his reputation to seek answers from Christ. This man sweeps away the old order, rich, poor, priest or Pharisees, Jesus does not seem to care about the established social order. Instead he speaks of being born again of water and the Holy Spirit.

Americans are fond of this concept and image of being born again. After all it was to get away from the established order that men and women first fled to the new world. They too sought a new beginning, just as Abraham had done. They too sought to be a church and society that was not restricted by petty rules or laws. They wanted to worship in freedom.

When we examine Jesus' words we are struck by the fact that they are totally inclusive.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life.”

To be born again is to live a new life, a life of faith. Jesus insists time after time that when we have faith, when we truly believe, what we regard as miracle, the impossible, becomes possible. When we have faith we seem to open a worm hole that allows God's grace to come flooding through.

To be born again, demands that the Holy Spirit enters and dwells in your life. People who are born again allow baptism to dictate their life. People who are born again see what is possible and know that with God's spirit they can achieve anything.

In dying on the cross Jesus opens up that access to grace and he liberates the Spirit of God to fill human hearts. All that is called for from us, is faith. Jesus asks us individually: “Do you believe? Do you believe in me? Because, if you believe in me than what I have to offer you is a transforming experience. Live by my teaching, be about my Gospel and I will give you eternal life. But if you say you believe in me, but that in all that you do, there is no sign of my teaching, then Gospel is not in your life and you must turn and face my cross.

The truth of Jesus is that he did not offer his followers wealth or happiness. He offered them the way of the cross. He offered them pain, suffering and hardship.

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So we have to ask ourselves the question in this holy season of Lent. What kind of Christian am I? Because being a Christian isn't the same as belonging to a political party. Being a Christian isn't the same as being Republican, and nowhere the same as being a Democrat. Being a Christian is to embrace the Gospel with every fiber of your being, such that you give of yourself till it hurts. Being a Christian is a smelly business where the poor, the diseased, the unwashed, the sinner and the untouchable are your brother and sister. Being a Christian is to win your place in the world and then give it away to someone who has nothing and doesn't even deserve it.

We can all measure our Christian commitment by the level of our forgiveness. Our faith calls us to forgive, for the one who died upon the cross was prepared to forgive all.

Lent invites us to be born again. It invites us to creep out under the cover of night to the Friday night service to rediscover Jesus. It invites us to reject being armchair Christians for the lonely road of the way, the way of the cross. It is almost as if Jesus is saying to each one of us: "When you begin to feel pain then you know you are following me."

Let's face it. Being a Christian is pretty inconvenient. Did you ever think that? I often think that especially driving to church Sunday at 6:45am. I think, the streets are empty, everyone is still in bed, or they are having ham and eggs, toast and mugs of hot coffee and they are still in their robe and watching *Good Morning America*.

Being a Christian is inconvenient when you cannot pass a beggar or a charity appeal. Being a Christian is inconvenient because it eats up a big slice of your time each day and each week. Being a Christian is inconvenient until Lent reminds us what Jesus the Lord did for us.

Because the Lord Jesus went on the road too, his ministry was not a convenient ministry, nor could he pass by the beggar or the sick, the poor or the rejected. His teaching was inconvenient when faced with ridicule and the righteousness of authority. His death on a cross of shame spoke an inconvenient truth that God, our God loves us to the extent that he allows his only son to die on our behalf.

Lent calls each of us to ask the question: "What kind of disciple am I?" Because the cross surely tells us what kind of Messiah Jesus was.

Amen+

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