

Sermon March 12th 2nd Sunday of Lent

By Kathryn A. Rickert, Ph.D.

"ALL OF US..."

and in you **all the families of the earth shall be blessed.**" Gen. 12:3

God loves the world so much that the Holy One, continues to give us the gift of Jesus, whose life and death *together, the ministry and the profound self-giving death* call us into intimate relationship with God, with each other and God's Creation, while being a blessing to All the families of the earth. Amen.

Introduction:

Thanks be to God for this occasion to come together to take in these living words and holy food to nurture and sustain our souls, in these most "interesting of times."

With God's help, I hope to offer something we need for the journey of here and **now**, the journey of Lent 2017 from here to Jerusalem with Jesus, as well as for the journey of there and then, the larger journey of our lives together in God. (the one that gets called "eternal life.")

But, *what* do we need for these journeys?

What will help to sustain and encourage us... (move our hearts) now, under *these* circumstances of disruptive uncertainty, division, and confusion?

It is certainly no accident that Avram's call from God involves being told to GO! on a long trip. Literal or metaphorical, we learn a lot on trips.

We and the world badly need the kinds of "stuff" that comes from such transformational trips. There we stand to see and learn more of

> the life-altering, heart-moving, mind-renewing unfolding that we see in Jesus' journey, both the life and the death / resurrection

> the intricate, tight weaving together of parables, examples, and preaching about loving our enemies, comforting those who mourn, forgiving 70 x 7, seeking out First the reign of God into a fabric of self-giving, humility, Holy justice, compassion and radical welcome.

There is a familiar pattern in the shape of Holy Week: moving from the great joy & triumph of Palm Sunday, the intimate, loving meal and community of Thursday Evening, through the shock, despair, agony, and humiliation of the Garden, and Cross and on into the Way of a completely unimagined joy of Sunday, New Life shared together with God *in a community of Faith*.

THREE PIECES of applied Faith for our journeys:

- 1.) **God has always loved all of us... "all the families of the earth."**
- 2.) **What we need for the journey depends upon where we are in the journey**
- 3.) **Hearing Voices, aka Humble Listening**

1. **God has always loved, ALL of us**, all along the whole trip of life,
here and now, there and then,
"All the families of the earth..."

A few weeks back I was part of a Jewish-Christian Dialogue in which we had this wonderful conversation about the meaning and place of "grace" in our various traditions. The group included two rabbis, three Episcopalians, and one Catholic Priest. *[No, this isn't a joke and we did not walk into a bar...]*

Although our understandings varied as much among the Christians as between the Jews, *most* of us find "grace" to be a fundamental aspect of our lives, both the Christians and the Jews.

We took a look at the different words used in Hebrew that become "grace" in English translations... and the word "hesed"...kindness, mercy was among them. We, Jews and Christians, shared with each other the places that Grace hold in our lives.

However, we all know that it is not unusual to hear today's Gospel reading from John means that God's love and grace show up only with Jesus in the New Testament and only for Christians.

How can that be? Good News is "supposed to be" a love story, not a horror story. More of the intense love of Song of Songs, or the passionate, broken hearted appeal of God weeping at injustice and greed,

"My people, what have I done to you...?
... into which the prophet Micah bids us to "walk humbly with our God."

God's love, and grace did not begin in the Gospel of Matthew. It's been there all along, in the Book of Genesis from "At the beginning of God's creating..." in Genesis 1... to ..."all the ends of the earth."

As our readings for today make clear, God's grace is very much found in God's unexpected call to Abraham in Genesis to **GO! to be blessed and to be a blessing** to all the families of the earth. (And Paul picks up on that same call and grace in his letter to the Gentile Christians at Rome.)

In our reading today from Genesis, God sends "Avram" and Sarai on a scary trip of change, blessing, and transformation. They are given new names, Avram and Sarai become Abraham and Sarah;

they are asked to procreate at rather advanced ages,
are given new names by the Holy One

go through some rather questionable encounters with Holy beings, and other important agents, etc.
 and are told to leave home and “move to an island” (*Something like what many of us have experienced when we moved here. Well, it wasn’t an island, but you get the idea...*)

In this piece, we see that God has always loved all of us, all the families of the earth.

Holding on to that piece, now, how do we hear John’s Gospel?

2. What we need for the Journey ALL DEPENDS On WE ARE IN THE Story!

Our specific locations on the journeys of Lent and life...
 heavily influence what we see, hear, long for, and need along the way.

Our location points towards what we need to sustain and encourage us, moving our hearts now, under these circumstances of disruptive uncertainty, division, and confusion.

Sometimes, we do not feel loved, protected or nurtured by God.
 Sometimes the calendar says it’s Lent, but our lives say, for me it is “Christmas or the Feast of the Resurrection”, or Pentecost, etc.
 and then other times, it’s the other way around

Sometimes Psalm 121 – today’s Psalm-- doesn’t fit where we are on the journey. And, that is not a lack of faith, that is the life of real faith in the Divine-human relationship.

One way of getting at this is to use the major aspects of Holy Week as indicators for the tone in which we would pray:

[Walter Brueggemann’s Version of the Various Places from which we pray, especially as found in the Psalter.]

Orientation	Disorientation	New Orientation
Palm Sunday & Thursday Night All is Well Thanks be to God	Friday in the garden, the Abuse, Betrayal, suffering, Death. The world is falling apart!! Woe! [<i>Where is God, now?</i>]	Sunday of Stunning Recognition Resurrection and New Life
On-Going -JOY	Grave Distress, Disruption	Unexpected JOY!!!!

from **the great joy** & triumph of Palm Sunday and the loving meal and community of Thursday Evening. That is where our Psalm for today comes from...from that place of a status quo of well-being, where we have a clear vision of God’s Presence in our lives.

OR from the **tragic betrayal** by those who loved him yet fled in the Garden, and Friday abandonment and agony This is where (Ps 22) comes from. It's that place where things in our world fall apart. There are more Pss of this kind, where things fall apart in the Psalter than the kind for Psalm Sunday.

Or out of the **completely unimagined joy** of Sunday ... shared together with God in a community of Faith

We are never all in the same place at the same time, and when we are in one place, the other places are difficult to remember, see, or to get to. Yet, we need all of these prayers and voices so that all the families of the earth might be blessed. We need a full set of "Voices" to sustain and nurture us along our journeys.

3. Lectionaries & Hearing Voices, aka Humble Listening

Because what we need for the journey depends upon where we are in the journey, it is really important to know and remember that there are many voices in Scripture...enough to speak to all the sorts and conditions of humans. All Pieces are after all...always only part of the whole.

In our Monday group, OT VOICES WE NEED... we've had a rich time of "hearing voices", recognizing the distinct, at times contradictory, yet also comprehensive Voices of Creation, Covenant, the Prophets, Wisdom, Lament and Praise, and the Apocalyptic.

These many voices are intentionally **not** harmonized within the OT. The minority reports are not deleted from the record, but rather included:

there are two Creation Stories,
At least five voices within the Five Books of Moses,
Many, many prophets,
Both Praise AND Lament,
and Wisdom literature on both sides of the question of good things happening or not happening to good people, etc.

Not just one VOICE!

One of the distinctions between how various lectionaries (Christian, Jewish,) are used is the question of seeing any particular combination of biblical texts either as a kind of quasi theological-mathematical equation, in which all of the various parts add up to one single "answer". The truth. That would be how many Christians use our lectionaries.

OR... then, there is a Jewish approach, in which a certain biblical text is juxtaposed with another. **EG. [Lekh Lekha Genesis 12:1-17:27 Isaiah 40:27-41:16]**

The pairing is NOT in order to calculate the various parts and come up with one single "answer". (The Truth....) but rather the opposite, to hold up together, against each

other, various pieces of the truth that challenge each other, and to see what happens in such an encounter. [It's the humility aspect at work here.]

Using that approach we will most certainly be posed with rather difficult questions that we cannot easily explain away.

Hearing the Word of God in Scripture, and other "rescued responses to the initiating Mystery and Presence of God in the course of human events... (M. Fishbane)...

AKA... finding what we need for these journeys these not so easy trips.

Is never *only* about adding up the various pieces of our lives or our sacred texts; more often, it is about courageously holding up the jagged pieces of the texts or our lives that do NOT fit neatly together, and asking...

What do these pieces of life have to say to each other?

And, why is there more than one voice?

Do you mean to suggest that no one human get is all?

So, if we were today to try out that more Jewish approach (Jesus was Jewish....) we might line up... this reading from John's Gospel...

"God loved the world so much that..."
along-side of God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12
"and you will be a blessing to all the families of the earth."

and see what happens when we try to connect the two?

How do these of pieces of the truth open out each other with something we need for today?

In a way, this is what those Stations of the Cross out in the hall *try* to do...
they try to help us see how it is that

"... the life of here and now is connected to and part of the life of there and then."
The kind of "life" (eternal life) that John's Gospel refers to is clearly MUCH more than only something we "get" when we die. It's about life both here and now, as well as there and then.

It is about an intimate, covenant relationship with God, with God's Creation,
including each other, and "**all** the families of the earth."

We do not think our way into that relationship, into transformation, into justice, or even to what the world needs...

Rather, we get there by love. By being loved and by loving.
to the extent that we increasingly see ourselves as part of this unbreakable
arrangement with God...(aka, The Covenant)

of which we catch a strong glimpse in Genesis 12, of God's Covenant with Abraham and Sarah, and all the families of the earth.

I realize that *The New York Times* is not included within the Lectionary of the Episcopal Church. But, perhaps it should be. Here is one of the best descriptions of the way the Covenant works. It is from David Brooks.

"You only do all this if you've set up a framework in which exit is not an easy option, in which you're assured the other person's love is not going away, and in which the only way to survive the crises is to go deeper into the relationship itself."

D. Brooks 3/7/17

(The Good news is a love story, rather than a horror story.)

And when I say, we get there by loving and being loved...
As seen in those Stations of the Cross out in the hall,
the ones of Jesus there and then as well as here and now:

There we see...

that the Jesus version of love, that very expensive, priceless kind of love
love that loved the world so much....all of us,
that somehow moves us *from within*,
in ways that we do not understand,
to live far beyond the domination and bonds of our individual needs and wants
to live with humility, wisdom, mercy, and compassion...
that come clearly, Only by the Grace of God.

There we see that we are called to be the children of Abraham and Sarah,
along-side of our Jewish and Muslim sisters and brothers
to live by faith and grace rather than "works", [*whatever that means*]
to be born of water and the Spirit,
to share in God's promised life of the here and now,
as well as there and then,
with all the families of the earth.

**God loves the world so much...
that the Holy One, continues to give us the gift of Jesus,
whose life and death *together*
show us how to be in intimate relationship
with God, with each other, and with God's Creation,**

**that we might live here and now, as well as there and then,
while being a blessing to All the families of the earth. Amen.**