

God loved the world so much . . .

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Genesis 12:1-4a (NRSV)

Now the Lord said to Abram, “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, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” So Abram went, as the Lord had told him;

John 3:1-17

From the start, reactions to Jesus ranged from skeptical to trusting, from adoring to hostile. Some were curious about Jesus, some suspicious. Some were convinced that God was with Jesus, but they were not at all sure what to conclude from that. Here is a story that features one such person.

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus at night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know you have come from God as a teacher, because no one can do these signs you do unless God is with him.” Jesus said to him, “I tell you the truth, without being born all over again, no one can see God’s kingdom.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can someone who is old be ‘born’? Is it possible to enter your mother’s womb a second time and to be born?” Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, without being born by water and spirit, no one can enter God’s kingdom. What’s born by the flesh is flesh, but what’s born by the Spirit is spirit. Don’t be surprised that I told you, You have to be born all over again. The wind blows where it wants, and you hear the sound it makes. But you don’t know where it comes from or where it goes. That’s the way everyone born by the Spirit is.”

Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be possible?” Jesus said to him, “You’re the Teacher of Israel, and you don’t know these things? I tell you the truth, we talk about what we know, and we testify about what we’ve seen; yet you don’t accept our testimony. If I tell you about earthly things and you don’t have faith, how will you have faith if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has gone up into heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who puts faith in him will have eternal life.”

(You see, God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who puts faith in him will not perish but will have eternal life. Because God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but through him to save the world.)

Children’s Story

There’s a story one of my seminary professors liked to tell. But first, let me ask you a question or two.

Have you ever been to Niagara Falls? At Niagara Falls a river, the Niagara River, flows over the edge of a cliff. All the water of the whole river crashes down and down. At the bottom of the cliff, it rolls and turns and swirls. And there are lots of rocks. And lots of mist.

Do you know what a tightrope walker does? A tightrope walker stretches a rope tight, climbs onto the rope, puts one foot in front of the other, using a pole to help with balance, and walks from one end of the rope to the other. The rope could be just above the floor, or it could be almost as high as the ceiling.

Once there was a tightrope walker named Blondin. He stretched his tightrope across Niagara Falls. Do you believe he could walk that tightrope from one end to the other, over the rocks and the swirling water? You do. Good. Because he did.

But that's not all. Sometimes Blondin would ask for a volunteer. The volunteer would climb onto Blondin's back. And then Blondin would climb onto his tightrope, the tightrope that was stretched across Niagara Falls. Do you believe it? Do you believe that Blondin could walk that tightrope from one end to the other, over the rocks and the swirling water, with someone on his back? Do you believe it? Well, you should. Because he did.

Here's one last question. Would you get on Blondin's back yourself? Believing he could do it is one thing. But climbing onto his back, that's another thing. That's more than believing. That's faith.

Sermon

Last week was an educational week for me. I started the week reading and interpreting Scripture. I found John 3, the text for this morning's sermon, both familiar and surprising. I wondered what it meant, what it means. Later in the week, I read about how to interpret the Bible. I found myself both challenged and affirmed. I wondered what I've been missing. On Thursday morning, the BREAD Clergy Caucus met. We talked about finding the social justice theme all over the Bible, whether the theme was there in a particular passage or not – so it seemed to me. Afterward I talked to a rabbi about reading and interpreting Scripture. He sent me a paper to read about Abraham's offering of Isaac. I found myself both anchored and unmoored. I wondered what God might be teaching me. Yesterday morning at Men's Breakfast, we talked about not selling the Gospel – and not selling the Gospel short. I found myself both annoyed and grateful. I wondered what to do about today's sermon, about reading and interpreting John 3. Perhaps we should attend to the contrasts in the story.

There is, for example, the contrast between knowing and not knowing. Nicodemus is the *Teacher of Israel*, but there's so much he doesn't know. He says, "Rabbi, we know you've come from God." And that's the last thing he knows. He doesn't know how someone can be "born all over again." He doesn't know the ways of "the wind." He doesn't know about "earthly things." He doesn't know about "heavenly things." He doesn't know God. Nicodemus, the *Teacher of Israel*, says, "Impossible! Impossible!" God says, "Let there be" – and it is so.

We think we know. That's our tradition. We think we know the Gospel. We think we know Jesus. We think we know God. But we don't, not really, not in the way we imagine.

Jesus says, in his great prayer to the Father (John 17), "This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." To know God is not to know that there is a God. To know Jesus Christ is not to know that God sent Jesus Christ. This knowing of God and of Jesus, which is eternal life, is not a matter of ideas. It's not a matter of information. It's not a matter of beliefs and convictions. This knowing is a matter of life and experience. To know God is to walk with God. To know Jesus Christ is to follow Jesus Christ. The foundation and substance of faith are found in these three words: "So Abram went." That's faith. Faith climbs onto the tightrope walker's back – even above Niagara Falls.

When Moses wanted to know God's name, God said, "I will be who I will be." With those words, God invited Moses and Israel to walk with God, to keep an eye on God, as if to say, "Walk in step with me, and then you will know me." Nicodemus didn't know God at all – nor do we, not until we're walking with Jesus into the places Jesus goes. Then we begin to know God, and not we alone.

There is also in John 3 the contrast between the work of the Spirit, on the one hand, and everything else we know, on the other. Ever since we banished mystery from the world, we've known everything within a chain of cause and effect. "What's born by the flesh is flesh," Jesus says. We know how that works. For ages we knew it intuitively, and we had it almost right. These days we know it with

scientific and medical precision. We know how it works. And, in another case, the fact is we do know where the wind comes from and where it goes. Not only are we able to explain the wind, we can predict the wind: hurricane on Thursday, heavy gusts tomorrow, tornado watch tonight.

The Spirit of God, on the other hand, is beyond predicting. The Spirit is not susceptible to cause and effect explanations. The Spirit is sovereign. The Spirit is mysterious, as mysterious as the wind was in a pre-scientific age. The Spirit gives new birth to people. And we can't predict who. And we don't know why. And where we see no signs of new birth, not with our limited perception, we can't say the Spirit is not present, that the Spirit is not at work.

But we can give in to the Spirit. We can welcome the Spirit's subtle and not-so-subtle promptings. We can let that mysterious "wind" change our course. And we can look for, and expect to see, signs of the Spirit everywhere. The Spirit is the air we breathe. The Spirit is life – not just for us, but for all people, for all creation. We can expect the Spirit to show up in unexpected ways, in unexpected places, in unexpected people. We live in a cause and effect world; the Spirit of God does not.

There is, as well, in John 3 the contrast between a path toward death and a way of life. (A path toward death. We had to get there eventually this morning. It is Lent, after all.) Jesus said, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake, so the Son of Man must be lifted up." The reference is to an obscure story in the book of Numbers. Once God sent poisonous snakes to punish the grumbling, rebellious Israelites. To neutralize the poison, a person had to look at a bronze snake that Moses had made and raised up on a pole. In the magic and mystery of faith, a trusting look would save your life, had you been bitten by a snake.

Well, a bronze snake on a wooden pole is one thing, but the Son of Man?

Jesus was on his way to die. And in the magic and mystery of faith, a trusting embrace of his death would spell life for everyone suffering death since the snake's first appearance in this long story. Death, the universal human experience, the universal human fate – death was about to come undone. Somehow death would be put to death by Jesus' death. Somehow his death would give birth to life, for himself and for all the children of God.

We don't know how it works. We've tried to explain it with cause and effect chains. We have our calculations and schemes – we call them *theories of the atonement* – but it remains a mystery. The Apostle Paul, following Jesus, tried out an analogy with a seed and plant. "The seed dies," he wrote, "before the plant lives." But a seed doesn't really die. New life just bursts out of it. Life is wrapped up in that seed.

A seed doesn't really die. Jesus did. And for some reason or set of reasons – because Jesus is the Son of Man, because he is the Son of God, because of how he died – for some reason or set of reasons, or for some unfathomable, unknowable mystery – whatever the reason, Jesus' death does for the world what the world desperately needs and what not a one of us, nor all of us, could ever do for the world. And though we don't know how it works, we know why it happened. "God loved the world."

"God loved the world." Do you hear how large that is? Do you hear anyone counted out of that? Do you hear anyone given a franchise?

"God loved the world" – loved it so much that he sent his Son to the world. The Son shared that love. And the Son died for that love.

We don't know how it works. There's so much we don't know. We don't know God as well as we think we do. We don't know the Gospel as well as we think we do. We don't know Jesus as well as we think we do. And the Spirit remains an utter mystery to us.

We don't know how it works. But we rest in the unexplainable mystery of God's love and in the life to which it gives birth, a life in which we begin to know God, begin to know God when we give in to the Spirit, give in to the Spirit and follow Jesus into the places Jesus goes – even to Jerusalem.

As Abram knew, faith begins when you get up and go.