

“Born Again Forgiveness”

Genesis 12:1-4a; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17

Part III of VIII in the Lenten sermon series, “Forgiveness”

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From the Pulpit

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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent 3, March 5, 2023, dedicated to Bill Kutschbach, Barbara Sterrett, Susan Sitler and in the first week after she turned 100 years young, Lola Davis Edwards, and always to the glory of God!

“Born Again Forgiveness”

Genesis 12:1-4a; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17

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Let us pray: *May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen*

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In Genesis 12:1-4a, Abram is simply minding his own business when God comes and calls him to get up and go out. On this day in history, God reaches out to offer a deal to all humankind through Abram.

God promises four things to Abram. He will give birth to a great nation (thus his name “Father of Many”). He will be blessed. His name will be great. His name will be a blessing to others. For good measure God vows to bless those who bless Abram and curse those who curse him. All Abram must do is follow God.

In this Call of Abram, the God of Abraham issues a summons to the world that people would be devoted to God instead of devoted to themselves. In essence, God chooses this man and throws an olive

branch to all generations. God is saying, *“If you worship me and put your life in my hands, you will be rewarded. If you resist other gods and risk being happy, I will reward you.”*

Abram accepts God’s call and goes – not knowing where he is going – rather completely trusting in God. He goes completely submitting himself to God. He does this through what he does best. He walks. He is good walker. He sets off walking. But, this time, he walks with God. By walking forward in the footsteps of God, he demonstrates something important – for all of us to follow. He leaves footprints for us to follow.

Most significantly, Abram does not believe in God! He BELIEVES God. He says yes to God’s call. He does not ask for proof. He provides the proof. His following God is the proof that God exists.

As the first man in the 20th generation of humankind, Abram is not spoken of as righteous (until the Apostle Paul calls him righteous thousands of years later in the Book of Romans). He is not particularly special. By the time we meet him he is old. He often seems unsure of himself. He makes mistakes. In a text which is completely focused on creation, Abraham and Sarah are not able to create. Their story is dominated by the childlessness. It is almost as if he is so unlike the Creator, that this makes him special. He is completely and utterly human! As such, he is completely in need of God! (Abraham, by Bruce Feiler, pp. 22-25).

While many in humanity, especially in our generation, strive to follow the Market God and become Godlike themselves – powerful, and always in control, in so doing, they lack what Abram possesses. They lack absolute humanness.

Nelly Sachs, the German poet who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1966, viewed Abram as a representative human being. She sees him as one looking out at a decimated landscape, peering beyond the flames, aching for just a piece of the divine. Nelly Sachs writes: *“You have called me Abram. And I long so much for you.”* (*Ibid*, p. 25).

By the 20th Generation of humankind, God certainly needs one such as this – one who is so human, yet one who longs so much for the divine. As much as we are like Abram – so human, and yet so longing for the divine – we too will find our rest and peace in God. Because of Abraham, between now and next Sunday morning, over 3 billion people – or more than half the world’s population, known as the Children of Abraham – Jews, Christians, Muslims – will pray to One God. They will invoke his name as they pray to our One God. It all begins in this verse of scripture from Genesis 12.

Our lesson in Forgiveness from Abram comes in the form of trust. So often we fail to forgive because we don’t trust. We do not trust God. We do not trust the outcome of our forgiveness. We refuse to give ourselves over to God. We want to stay in control and forgiving and being forgiven means to yield control. To let go means to give the power to God – when all along, we thought we had all the power.

We start asking, “what if this happens?” or “what if that happens?” What if she says this? What he says that? What if I pour my heart out and Sally or Sam and they do not forgive me? What if they do not accept my forgiveness? Abram calls us – as God calls – to MOVE. Inertia never produces Forgiveness. Movement and Action produce Forgiveness. Abram teaches how to trust and how to move and how

to simply – in the words of 12 step programs – to “Let Go and Let God.”

It is not easy to follow God’s promise – to take risks and to resist the powerful in this world in which we live. If we don’t believe this, we should look more closely at chapter 3 in John’s Gospel. Here we are presented with a refreshing story about the presence of God in Jesus Christ.

A man named Nicodemus; a leader of religious Jews steps out his comfort zone, out of his house of privilege. He seeks Jesus – not in the daylight – but under the cover of night. He needs to figure out who this Jesus is. What is Jesus teaching? What does he have that Nicodemus longs to have? In an exchange between the men, we come to realize Jesus has what Nicodemus is missing. Jesus has peace with God. He has the Holy Spirit. He has the keys to the kingdom of God. He has the promise of eternal life.

In the end, Jesus shares with us and with Nicodemus the truth of the Gospel in one verse (as Martin Luther called it). Listen to these words in the language given by Eugene Peterson – *“This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life”* (John 3:16-17).

Simply put – to Nicodemus and to each of us – God loves you! God loves us! God loves you so much that God would give God’s Son – God’s one and only Son – for each of us. Christ came into **the world** (not this church, not any one church, not Columbus, not America, but **the entire world**) not to destroy the world, but to offer the world hope and wholeness and lasting life.

Somewhere between the beginning of each of our lives and this point, we may have lost track of the amazing gift we have in the love of God for us through our Savior Jesus Christ. It is always good and fruitful for our lives of love and forgiveness to be reminded of this. It is also good to remember and celebrate in the truth that God is not in the business of condemning us or the rest of the world. While others may want to play God and manipulate the words of God for judgment, not grace, God isn't in that business. God is in the Love Business. God is in the Saving Business. God is in the Redemption Business. God is in the Forgiving Business – for each of us and for the entire world!

But, what does God's loving and saving business look like?

John 3:14-15 tells us that life in God's love – through Christ – is both uplifting and eternal. Like Moses' serpent in the wilderness, Jesus is lifted up – both on the cross and in the ascension into glory – and in this lifting, belief in God's sacrifice and glory are given new shape and new hope in eternal life.

Uplifting and eternal! These are the central elements of God's saving love. I have seen the uplifting and eternal nature of God's love so often become manifest in the love, through suffering and pain, that people share in difficult and tumultuous times. While I sometimes wish I could wave a magic wand as a pastor and see all pain go away, all pain disappear, I am aware that I can't. Moreover, the immensity of love would be diminished and unrecognizable without any pain. To suffer in love for and with the one whom you love, amid their suffering, is to live life to its holiest. We actually come to see eternal life in the face of such suffering. We see grace, twisted

by pain, but embraced by love. We see a peace which passes human understanding, growing forth from the depth of suffering.

Years ago, in the Toledo Museum of Art, a painting entitled, “The Deposition,” showed the scene at the foot of the cross following the death of Jesus. His body was deposed. It off the cross. It is on the earth below. As the dead body of Jesus lies at the foot of the cross, John, the beloved disciple, is beside him, having just washed his body of blood. Jesus’ mother, Mary is looking on, but close at hand. Her face is twisted in pain. Her body is turned halfway towards her son who is dead before her on the ground and halfway from it. She feels she must look one more time and she can’t bear to look one more time. In the distance, you see several people including the shadowy figure of Peter, who had denied and abandoned Jesus in his time of crucifying death.

For those who have stood by the cross – stood by him in his suffering – there is intense pain, but their pain is holy pain. For those who have tortured him, or betrayed him or abandoned him, the pain is different. It is the pain of unholy guilt.

It is what we do in the face of the cross and at the foot of the cross which matters most. If we are to experience God’s uplifting and eternal love, we must go there. We must abide there. We must work through the pain.

The ones who teach us about the saving love of God, are the ones in our lives who show us in their suffering how to love and even how to praise God and be of service to others.

Stephen Shoemaker tells the story of such a woman in his book *God Stories*. Jean Stout was a Kentucky woman who was disfigured and

struggled with so many disabilities. Because of all this, as a young person, she had been too embarrassed about how she looked to be baptized. So, later in life, Stephen baptized her in her nursing home bed. When she was close to death, taking massive doses of medicine to reduce her pain, Stephen was visiting with Jean. She smiled at Stephen and said, *“The only thing that helps me in my pain is liquid morphine. This may sound silly to you pastor, but that morphine is the most beautiful color of blue I have ever seen...until the water of baptism.”*

Her improbable praise brought tears to Stephen.

Jean Stout reached a point in her battle for life, in which she said something: *“God you’ve been in my actions, you’ve guided my life, and walked with me through all I have encountered. Now be in my dying, lift me up and carry me in your arms into the heavenly dwelling place that you call home. I can no longer care for my family, Lord. I hate that worse than anything. So, I leave them in your hands in the hands of those who you send as angels of mercy and love. Help them accept your presence in their lives, however you choose to make your love manifest.”* And with those words she dies.

I have heard such words at the bedside of your beloved ones through the years. When such words as this come into the hearts and minds of people, a healing happens. It is a healing deeper than the body, which is destined for death, a healing that is a final union with God. From such as these, I have learned not only how to die, but how to live. I have learned how to offer my passion to God as well as my well-intended actions.

At the heart of today’s gospel is one word – LOVE. It is simply love. It is GOD’S LOVE. This verse tells us that the initiative in all salvation comes from the heart of God.

Listen to this verse, unpacked by phrases and listen to its powerful message of love: “**God so loved . . . God so loved the world . . . God so loved the world that he gave . . . God so loved the world that he gave his only son . . . God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whosoever believes in him ...** *God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.*”

Mother Teresa of Calcutta once said of John 3:16 – “*The Good News is that God **still loves the world** through you. You are God’s Good News. You are God’s love in action. Each time anyone comes in contact with us, they must become different and better people because of having met us. Each of us must radiate God’s love.*”

God still loves the world and by many accounts, it is not a world that is easy to love. I think we can all agree on that. Hey, we are not easy to love. Terror, war, hunger, oppression, the violence and injustice are among those elements of man’s inhumanity to man that make this world hard to love. God has to love the world in the face of the world hating God or battling with God. Nevertheless, God continues to love the world.

God loves the unlovable and the unlovely. God loves those who are really down and up! God loves the lonely that have no one else to love them. God loves the man who never thinks of God. God loves the woman who lives in God’s presence constantly. God loves the graceless and the graceful. God loves the one who has never given a thought to God and knows not how to lift a prayer and the one who seeks God in prayer every day. God loves the one who is angry at God and the one who is content in God. God loves the one who

spits at God and God loves the one who smiles at God. God loves you and God loves me.

As St. Augustine has written, *“God loves each of us as if there was only one of us to love.”*

Because God loves us so much, I ask each to experience this renewal of the spirit. To figure out how this leads us to be born again, renewed again in Forgiving Love. Let us embrace the promise made to Abram and fulfilled in Jesus the Christ. May we get up and follow God – our God – who gave us and gives us Jesus as a sign of God’s love. Forgiveness will rule our hearts when we embrace such wonderful love as this. Amen.

