



SAINT LUKE'S

WE ARE ALL BORN FROM ABOVE

THE SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

YEAR A

GENESIS 12:1-4A

PSALM 121

ROMANS 4:1-5, 13-17

JOHN 3:1-17

A SERMON BY THE REV. POSEY KRAKOWSKY

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For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16

Does anyone else remember Rainbow Man? Rainbow Man, whose real name was Rollen Stewart, was very well known in the 1970's and 1980's. He was famous because he wore a rainbow colored wig and stood in very prominent places at sporting and other events, hoping to be shown on camera. He always held a sign with JOHN 3:16 on it. He was bringing his version of the Gospel to anyone who saw him. For him, the message of the gospel was: believe in Jesus and accept him as your personal savior, or be subject to eternal damnation. He really wanted everyone to be saved. But that saving grace could only come about in this one prescribed way. I wish I could say that Rainbow Man was an outlier in this belief. But while Rollen Stewart was extreme in the way he exercised his ministry, he is not alone.

John 3:16 is a verse that has been used all too frequently as an exclusionary verse ~ a winnowing verse. A terrorizing verse. Believe in Jesus or go to Hell. That's the message of many churches. I was looking in Google, and I saw an image of one highway billboard that explicitly said this: "Where will you spend eternity? In Heaven or hell? Read John 3:16."

When I was looking over today's Gospel passage, I couldn't help but think that this kind of interpretation of that verse is symptomatic of the kinds of exclusionary and barrier creating thinking we are experiencing in the world today. We see it on all sides of the political spectrum. What struck me

when I read the Gospel today was that the situation at the time John's Gospel was written was equally fraught ~ both politically and spiritually. Most scholars attest that John's Gospel was the last of the 4 Gospels to be written. At that time, the Johannine community was one of many voices in an ongoing discussion over the future of Judaism after the destruction of the 2nd temple by the Romans.

Losing that geographic center of worship caused a crisis of identity. What would eventually emerge over time were distinct groups ~ Jews and Christians. But that separation and those boundaries certainly did not happen overnight. Along the way in those first few centuries of the common era, there were many groups and subgroups in dialogue, even among those who began to call themselves Christians.

Our gospel text today is a story about that kind of dialogue. While interpreters like Rainbow Man would say this was an *interfaith* discussion, it's actually not. This is a story of *intra-faith* dialogue. Both of the participants are Jewish. And it is NOT a story about weeding out, winnowing, or excluding. Instead, a modality of interacting is being modeled for us. At the heart, this story is about relationships and trust.

Last fall in my class, I had the pleasure of working with three students from the Jewish Theological Seminary. Speaking with them and reading their papers was a very poignant and visceral reminder of a truth we sometimes forget to acknowledge when we read scripture ~ that there is a long history of dialogue and debate in interpretation. This history comes from our deep

roots in Judaism. One of my students, for his final project, made a set of shtenders ~ the book holders that rabbinical students use when they dialogue about the scriptures. There are two reasons for the existence of the shtenders: 1) the students hands are freed because they don't have to hold the books and 2) the shtenders are set on a table, so the two students can sit directly across from each other and look each other in the eyes. The physical placement of the scriptures means that the discussions are the exchanges of two people in relationship with each other, not that of one person talking down to another.

In our gospel text, Nicodemus comes to dialogue ~ he addresses Jesus as rabbi, meaning that he recognizes that Jesus has authority. Nicodemus himself, we are told, is considered *a leader* in his community. These two are partners in the dialogue ~ just like a pair of rabbinical students in the 21st century addressing each other over their shtenders.

In order to have a dialogue, participants have to be willing to open themselves to other points of view. In order to do *that*, there needs to be some level of trust between them.

John's Jesus speaks directly to this issue of trust in 3:16. The word we read in the lectionary as "belief" is *pisteo* in Greek. That word means to be worthy of trust – to entrust oneself to with complete confidence. It's the difference between saying to someone "I believe you" vs. the much deeper statement of "I believe IN you." I have confidence in you – you are worthy of my trust and therefore, we are in relationship.

It is that second type of belief which matters in this story. Jesus is telling Nicodemus that God is trustworthy – God is faithful. God desires to be in relationship with us. God will not abandon us. Indeed, the very next sentence tells us that God desires to save the world, not condemn it.

So this is not a winnowing verse. It's not an excluding verse. It is not about a cosmic reward and punishment scheme where God judges us based on our choices.

Instead, it's a verse about how God chooses to be in relationship with us - a relationship of love and trust. God desires this so much that God chose to become one of us to show us what that looks like.

Writer Barbara Crafton says:

*“God’s love – both God’s love for us and our for God, is not (about separation). There is no space between us in the kingdom of heaven. Heaven is not a place in which we become flawless versions of our earthly selves. What is overcome in Heaven is our separateness. The love of God draws us together with God and, because it draws **us all**, it joins us to one another.”*

Note those two important words: *us all*.

Not just the Christians. Not just the Christians who say the right formula.

Every great religious tradition has a road map to guide us in living into that relationship of trust. For Episcopalians, it is the Scriptures, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Creeds. For Jewish people, that roadmap is the Hebrew Bible and the commentaries. For Hindus, it is the Upanishads, the

Vedas and the Brahmanas and the Bhagavad-Gita, just to name a few. For Muslims, it is the Quran and the hadith.

These roadmaps are not about *earning* God's love – Grace is ours already, freely given by God. The roadmaps are about helping us to recognize and experience that Grace. About waking up to the reality that the kingdom of God – heaven – *is at hand, here and now.*

We are all born from above.

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