



SERMONS THAT WORK

Lent 2 (A)

Gifts

[RCL] Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17

In 2015 two psychologists reviewed six studies on gift-giving, looking in particular at the kinds of gifts chosen. They divided the gifts into two categories: those based on the interests of the recipient versus those that reflect the giver's personality or interest. It is probably not any surprise that all parties prefer giving and receiving recipient-centric gifts. The gift is supposed to be about the recipient, right? However, the study found both the giver and receiver reported higher feelings of closeness when the gift reflected the giver.

When one stops to think a bit more about this, what initially seemed counterintuitive starts to make sense. Some of the most beautiful gifts involve giving part of oneself. Creating a curated playlist of favorite songs — or in decades past, burning a CD or making a mixtape—or collating a book of one's favorite poems reflect the giver's preferences. But the thought, time, and love that go into the process foster closeness. Today, the readings offer a look at the gifts that God gives and an exploration of how they might pull us ever closer to God's presence.

Lent, that liturgical space carved out for penitence and fasting, is also an opportunity to reflect on the gifts that God has given us. These forty holy days are indeed about self-sacrifice and self-denial, but they are also a time to look to foster closeness with the Divine.

In the passage from the Hebrew Bible, God calls Abram out of his homeland with the promise of future blessings for him and the whole world. The great patriarch immediately follows God's call. Then, in the reading from the Epistle to the Romans, Paul takes this story up to make sense of the relationship between Israel, the law, Gentiles, and salvation. In a sometimes meandering but sustained argument, Paul's theologizing is complex and much ink has been spilled over the centuries over what exactly he meant.

But the complexity should not prevent us from diving in and listening to God's word from Paul's letters. Abraham, Paul says, is not justified by his own works of obedience or righteousness. No, it is God who justifies the ungodly, and God alone has the power to give life and justify Abraham. While Abraham might have thought that his blessing was for his descendants to become a great nation, God had even bigger plans and a bigger gift to bestow. For through Abraham, not only are his descendants blessed and a blessing, but God calls even those outsiders, the Gentiles, to be part of God's people. New Testament scholar Beverly Gaventa notes, in Paul's telling, the Abraham story is about what *God* does, not what *Abraham* does. God's gift is bigger than Abraham could imagine. The story of Abraham can be read to be about obedience and about following God,

but in this passage, the hero of the narrative is the God who “gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.”

And that is the truth pointed to in the gospel reading for today. Mysteriously and unexpectedly, the God of the universe has given from God’s own self in the person of Jesus Christ, the ultimate gift to the world. How many of us have John 3:16 etched in our brains? “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

The verse captures the beauty of the heart of the gospel with simplicity and depth. But the words can become perhaps almost too familiar. A famous multimedia artist based one of his video pieces off of a VHS tape that he rented where the end of the movie had been played over and over to the extent that the physical tape had been damaged, with images skipped, blurred, or even erased. The same might be said of John 3:16—so many preachers and exegetes rush to fast-forward or rewind to this verse that the frames around it and within it can become occluded and obscured. And even within the verse, many evangelists fast-forward to the last bit of the verse: “that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life,” putting the primary push of the verse onto what humans need to do. And that’s one way to read the passage, but there’s more to the passage than the human response.

Nicodemus, a prominent Pharisee, has come to Jesus at night to learn from this newcomer to the scene. After some confusion about being born again, Jesus plays with the word “pneuma,” which can mean spirit or wind. “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Some things are beyond comprehension and beyond human conception. Just like the wind, God goes where God will. It is in this context that Jesus then goes on to speak of Moses lifting the snake in the wilderness and then hits us with verse 16: “For God so loved…” The action starts with God. God gives what God will give, and God gives of God’s own self. God gives love, and God gives life.

These passages teach us that we’re called into a story that’s bigger than we can imagine. The story is full of mystery and complexity, but ultimately, it’s a story about and by God. And at the beginning, at the end, and at the heart of that story is love. It’s this love that saves us, propels us through hard times, and may even call us into uncomfortable and difficult situations. But throughout it all, God is there with us. For God so loved the world that God gave of God’s self to be with us and give us life – no matter what.

Lent is a time to realize that God’s gifts are better than any we could ever imagine, and they pull us ever closer into God’s loving embrace. Let us dwell in that love that we have received from God, that mysterious, saving, and disruptive love. Amen.

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