

So That All Might Be Saved

a sermon based on

Genesis 12:1-4*a* & John 3:1-17

and delivered on

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at

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We hear in both passages of Scripture today good news that is sometimes (if not often) ignored by the faithful. Maybe “ignored” isn’t even the right word. Maybe I should have said that we hear in both passages of Scripture today good news that the faithful reject. We just read it. The words were on the screen behind me if I or the reader mispronounced or muddled a word you would have seen what Scripture said. What good news am I talking about? Are you asking yourself that? I imagine you are. You may even be itching to open your Bible or one of those in the pew to figure out what good news gets ignored or rejected by the faithful. Each of you – each of us – probably has that same voice in your head saying, I for one try NOT to ignore Scripture; and I most certainly never reject it! I might get confused or befuddled and not always understand, but that’s different. Am I right? So what good news am I talking about?

In the earlier passage, Genesis 12, it’s what we hear the LORD say to Abram at the end of verse 3. After he’d promised to make him a great nation and to bless those who bless him and curse those who curse him the LORD says “(A)nd in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” Is that voice going on in your head that saying, “I don’t reject that. What Christian would?”

Let’s turn to the Gospel reading, then. Shall we? What good news is our crazy preacher saying that Christians ignore or reject? Come on, this is where we hear Jesus talking about what it means to be born again. Right? We might disagree sometimes on whether that’s an immediate epiphany or a gradual transformation like one of those long labors, but it’s not something that we ignore or reject. I’m guessing that most of you can recite John 3:16 from memory. Am I right? What is it? If we have it memorized, we certainly haven’t ignored it. We don’t usually even try to remember things that we reject. But it’s that next line, that’s so important that does get ignored and even rejected. It’s that next line, John 3:17, which says, “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

It’s these two bits of good news that I want to explore, today. The Lord didn’t just promise Abram that he would be blessed, but that it was so that he would be a blessing (Ge. 3:2) and that ALL the families of the earth would be blessed. Not some. Not many. All of the families of earth – not might – not may be – but SHALL be blessed. These are what get ignored or rejected and undermine the good news.

When Nicodemus came to Jesus in the middle of the night, he came as a member of the Sanhedrin – the seventy religious leaders of Israel. When Nicodemus came to Jesus in the middle of the night, he came as a Pharisee. When Nicodemus came to Jesus, he came as a man who knew that as a descendant of Abraham, he belonged to God. Gentiles? Eh? Maybe? God’s nice that way. Maybe this is what brought him out. He knows that Jesus has come from God. He says so. We heard him say it in the first verse of that passage. He defends Jesus (maybe not as well as I think he should have). He defends Jesus when the religious leaders want to kill him. Still, he’s confused. We don’t know the entirety of his conversation with Jesus that night. John wrote down what was important for us to know. It just seems a little too abrupt the way Jesus blurts out, “Truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” (Jn 3:1) Did he ask for some clarity about the things Jesus had been preaching? We know his disciple did. Right? “Explain it to us.” How many times is that recorded in the Gospels? I can imagine Nicodemus saying, “I know you are from God, but it seems like you’re forgetting that God was specific in his covenant with Abraham and his descendants.”

I’m not trying to pick on Nicodemus, here. This was an argument Jesus had repeatedly with the Pharisees who got their panties in a knot about things not even in Scripture like a mandate to wash hands before eating, so that it wasn’t even enough to be a descendant of Abraham in order for God to want to bless you, but you had to be not only a good Jew, but an exceptional Jew. This is troubling for the faithful, because it seems to be permissive.

Of course to get there, you kind of have to skip over – or overlook (I’m not sure of the right word) – to not really ignore parts of the story but maybe just not to think they’re that important sort of like the background noise of narration.

You see, this Abram – who would become Abraham – was not perfect. He was a flawed character. There are some great things about him. His father, Terah, was an idol maker. So what do you think Abram did while he was growing up? He helped his father make idols – probably idols of Nannar the moon god, but that’s not important to our discussion here. According to some writings outside of Scripture, Abram looked at these wooden and metal creations and realized that there was no way that something he could make could have the power of a god over him and so that is why we sought and found God. That’s a good thing. Even in the passage today, when the LORD tells him to go away from his home and everything he knows, he does. When God tells him that he will be a father in his old age, he acts on it. Just not the way that God intended. Before that as he’s wandering in search of the home God has promised, he gets afraid of the kings whose realms he enters. He tells his wife, Sarai, that if she’s asked to say that she is his sister, because he’s afraid they will kill him in order to get her. He does it twice – once in Aram and once in Egypt. Both times, God has to reveal to the kings that Sarai is his wife before they act on their lust for another man’s wife. Even his defense is a bit creepy, “Well, yeah, she is my wife, but I didn’t really lie. She’s also my half-sister.” This is the man God chose to be a blessing to all the families of the earth?

Later on in Scripture, Leviticus 18 lays it out about prohibited sexual expression that incest is NOT okay. But this is who Abram was when he turned to God, an incestuous son of an idol maker, who realized that God just had to be bigger, and who found God. Rather than condemning him, God transformed him. “For what does the scripture say?” (I’m quoting Romans 4:3) “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” It doesn’t say that Abraham was righteous, but that he believed God. He tried? Even though he screwed up from time to time after that, he tried to be righteous. He strived for righteousness. Even for the city of Sodom, he pleaded with God to spare the city – that means to spare even all the wicked people, if only ten righteous men might be found in its midst. (Gen 18:32) OF course there weren’t ten. Only Lot (Abraham’s nephew) was found to be righteous. But that’s some righteous character. Isn’t it? Pleading against condemnation for others even if there is only a trace amount of righteousness?

In both passages today, we have imperfect characters. In both passages today, we have men who are seeking – even striving – but who are flawed. To one God promises that he would be blessed, and a blessing and that in him all the families of the earth would be blessed. Not because of his righteousness or his perfection, but because God was making a way in him to bless the world, even the moon worshipers that he grew up with.

But he had to be willing to leave behind the corruption of what he’d known. He had to be willing to leave everyone he knew and everything to which he was accustomed to claim that blessing. This guy was even willing – although certainly racked with angst – but willing to actually kill his own son if that was what God expected. OF course that’s not what God expected. At least not of Abraham.

Abraham was willing to offer his son as a sacrifice to confirm his love of God, but also really quick to claim that alternative when that ram was caught in the thicket near him. And God actually did sacrifice his Son because he loved – because he loves us so dearly. Even as flawed as we are.

Let us not ignore or reject the good news that we hear today. Let us not reject the good news, that for all of your flaws, your failures, and your unrighteousness, that Jesus didn’t come to condemn anyone – not me, not you, not that heathen at work. Those who believe in Jesus – like

Abram who believed God and acted – those who believe in Jesus receive not only the promise of blessing in eternal life, but also promise that even in our flawed attempts at righteousness others will be blessed in us. AMEN.