

March 12, 2017
The Second Sunday in Lent
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

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

Many years ago, the cartoonist and author Lynda Barry was a regular commentator on National Public Radio, and I was a regular listener. I remember only one of her recorded segments from that time. In it she described her experience of Ash Wednesday at her Roman Catholic elementary school. As I remember, she was in second or third grade, and her teacher had put some slips of paper into a hat. On each slip of paper was written the name of an item to be given up for Lent. The children lined up. One by one, each child pulled a slip out of the hat, and then read aloud to the rest of the class the thing they would have to give up.

Lynda's turn came. With great trepidation, she pulled a slip out of the hat. On it was written, "Television." "Television?" Lynda said. "I have to give up TELEVISION?" This was the worst possible outcome, worse even than giving up chocolate. Lynda was still recovering from this horrible news when the girl behind her reached into the hat and read her slip of paper. "Broccoli," it said. Lynda was beside herself. Lynda had to give up *television* while the next girl only had to give up *broccoli*? No one likes broccoli anyway! As the adult Lynda commented, "It was the moment when I realized that *life is unfair*."¹

No matter how much we prepare, many of the events of our lives are beyond our control. The changing tides of fortune sometimes take us places we would rather not go. In the great roll of the dice that is life, some of us are more vulnerable than others to the effects of life's downturns. Like many of you, several weeks ago I starting considering what my Lenten discipline should be this year. I thought about what I might give up. But the fact is that in having extra *to* give up, I occupy a privileged position. Having anything extra sets me apart from a huge percentage of the world's population. In fact, from chocolate to wine to television and even to broccoli, I could give up a smorgasbord of things, and still have a wealth of indulgences remaining. If life was fair, I would have a lot less.

Let's turn to the Gospel of John. In today's reading you can detect some of the themes that set this Gospel apart from the others. Jesus is the light of the world; Jesus is the Word made flesh. With a sort of mystical quality, John's Jesus juxtaposes light and darkness; Spirit and flesh; those who "get it" and those who don't.

In this story Jesus' foil is Nicodemus, a Pharisee, one of the religious authorities who enjoy power and privilege. He and the others know about the renegade who has been saying and doing outrageous things. Nicodemus wants to know more, so he goes directly to Jesus. Not wanting anyone to see him, he sneaks out in the night. In their question-and-answer session, Nicodemus can't seem to get his head around what Jesus is saying. Maybe Nicodemus's education and position have left him thinking he already knows everything. Maybe he has gotten comfortable with his life and can't imagine the disruption that Jesus implies. Maybe he can't fathom that the system that privileges him might not be exactly what God intends. There Nicodemus sits with the light of the world, and it is as if shades cover his eyes.

In some ways, I'm a lot like Nicodemus. He's a Pharisee, a religious leader of his time—that's me. Compared to many in his society, he enjoys the benefits of education, and his position is comparatively secure—that's me, too. Sometimes shades cover *my* eyes, and for many of the same reasons that might have hindered Nicodemus. I think I already know everything; I don't want my life disrupted; I can't imagine something new. Jesus tells Nicodemus, and he tells me, that I can cover my eyes—I can even cover my ears and sing “la la la la”—but it doesn't change the truth: I don't know everything; my life will be disrupted; change will come whether I can imagine it or not. That's true for me, and it's true for you.

In my Ash Wednesday homily, I spoke about tenderness and vulnerability. I suggested that tenderness and vulnerability are necessary for growth, that they might be good for our relationships with God and our lives in the world. I want to further emphasize that, if any of us are feeling tender and vulnerable, it's very likely for reasons we didn't choose. Mine was brought on by new, firm, and difficult evidence that I don't know everything; that my life will be disrupted; that change comes whether I can imagine it or not.

Last month I realized that I was looking forward to Lent this year, hoping it would bring some relief—mental, emotional, and spiritual. At some point it abruptly occurred to me that what *I* needed to do for Lent is to give up *fretting*. It would be easier to give up television. I suppose that what I'm really trying to do is to replace *fretting* with *faith*. Growth in faith is really the project of a lifetime. But sometimes it helps to have the focus of Lent.

A thread running through today's Lenten Bible readings and psalm is the confidence of faith, the assurance of God's grace and blessing. In our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, God says to Abram, “I will bless you ... so that you will be a blessing.” In our reading from the Epistles, Paul says to the Romans that God's grace is given freely, that it doesn't need to be—in fact it can't be—earned.

Sometimes I wish I was an Evangelical with an Evangelical's certainty about all this. I imagine the person always seen at televised sports events, the one holding a sign that says, “John 3:16.” We heard John 3:16 in our Gospel reading today: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Many of us non-Evangelicals struggle with that verse. But it might help to hear one author's take on it:

For many Christians, the gospel is summarized by the words in John 3:16. Everyone who believes in Jesus will not perish but will have eternal life. Some Christians, however, understand faith or “believing in Jesus” to be simply what one does with one's mind. In John's Gospel, being born from above and believing in Jesus are clearly not so much about what one does with one's mind as about what one does with one's heart and one's life. ... In John's Gospel believing and doing are inseparable.²

Part of our work together during this priest-in-charge time is to understand this congregation's identity. Part of that process is discerning its gifts and how those gifts might be offered to the larger community. In that regard, the "Catechism" of the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* says this:

The ministry of *lay persons* is to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be; and, according to the gifts given them, *to carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world*; and to take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church (emphasis mine).³

Let me repeat that middle part: "The ministry of lay persons is ... according to the gifts given them, to carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world." Believing and doing are inseparable. God blesses us with God's grace, individually and collectively, so that we might be a blessing to others. In this often unfair world, it would seem that our blessings in life are not only or even primarily for us; they are meant to be shared. As we share with others, so they share with us.

I take heart from noticing that, while Nicodemus may be a little dense, the passage from John doesn't say that he *never* gets it. It simply leaves Nicodemus there, sitting in the dark—at least for the time being. In fact we hear of Nicodemus twice more in John's Gospel. Midway through he's taking up for Jesus with the other Pharisees and the chief priests. Near the end, he brings the spices and, with Joseph of Arimathea, prepares Jesus' body for burial. The things that Jesus said must have been working in Nicodemus. That is to say, God's grace must have been working in Nicodemus, and he became a blessing to Jesus.

Once we know the rest of the story, Nicodemus becomes a great Lenten example for us. Nicodemus, in the darkness, fretfully wearing a pair of very hip Ray Ban shades even inside, sidles up to Jesus and asks him what in the world is going on. It takes a while, but eventually Nicodemus takes off those sunglasses. The light is not blinding. Instead, the light is revealing.

Sometimes we choose our Lenten practices; sometimes they fall on us as randomly and unfairly as if they were drawn from a hat. Regardless, the goal is the same. May God continue to send grace into our lives, helping us to be a little like Nicodemus, sidling up to Jesus and listening for the hints about what's next. With God's grace fret-free, we toss aside our Ray Bans and see the light of the world, illuminating us and all that Jesus would have us help to heal and to restore. May God continue to bless us, so that we *will* be a blessing to others.

Notes

¹ This retelling of a radio essay by Lynda Barry is recounted entirely from memory.

² George W. Stroup, Second Sunday in Lent, John 3:1-17, Theological Perspective, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year A, Volume 2: *Lent through Eastertide*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).

³ The 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*, 855. Similarly, the ministry of a bishop includes, "to act in Christ's name for the reconciliation of the world and the building up of the Church." Curiously, the ministry of reconciliation is not mentioned for priests or deacons.