

Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent, Year A, 17.ii.2008, 10:00 a.m.
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Brogue, Pennsylvania
Holy Eucharist, *ELW* Setting 5
Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17

J. J. !

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was
and Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

**"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.**

**"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."**

-- John 3:16, 17

In today's Gospel, the Pharisee and member of the Jewish
Council, Nicodemus, comes to Jesus full of questions about
who Jesus is and what He teaches. Jesus teaches
Nicodemus to expect a new covenant and a new exodus for
God's people, a new *birth* into a new life in the Kingdom

of God in which God's promise to Abraham to bless all the families of the earth is fulfilled.

In today's first Reading, the as yet unnamed LORD God calls Abram to leave his country, the cradle of civilization, making an everlasting Covenant with him. Through Abram/Abraham, three great historic communities of the People of God are formed. Through Hagar, his Egyptian concubine, an unnamed nation of great heritage and blessing is founded in Ishmael, Abraham's first son. In the Qur'an, this nation is explicitly identified with the Arab tribes united by the Prophet Muhammad. Though Muhammad does not appear until the sixth Christian century, this blessing is spoken of in the Book of Genesis and it is to that blessing that the Qur'an refers. I personally wonder whether some of the resentment of the Muslim Arab world toward the West has to do with the fact that

both Jews and Christians have ignored the Angel's prophecy to Hagar in the Book of Genesis.

The main subject of the First Testament of the Bible is the story of another people, the people of Israel, the people of God founded through Abraham's wife, Sarah, and his son by her, Isaac. The history of this people is told in detail, elaborated without covering up the fact that this is the history of a real people, a real nation that lives or seeks to live in a place they believe God has promised them. The only thing that distinguishes this people from other nations, the Bible emphasizes, is that this nation exists only because of God's call and promise. A certain land, a specific place on earth is part of that promise. The land of Israel is part of the destiny of Israel.

In the process of this ingathering of the Hebrew people, other peoples will suffer, as they do to this day,

and, in turn, the Hebrews themselves will suffer, just as they do to this day. The Levites, the Judæans and the Benjaminites, will be the sole survivors of the Babylonian conquest and captivity. Generically referred to and identifying themselves as ‘Jews,’ this remnant will continue to experience persecution and attempts at complete genocide, right down to our own time.

"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."

And then, through one Jewish mother, Mary of Nazareth, and her Jewish Son, Jesus, and through the one God and Father of all Whose eternal Word was born and fulfilled in Jesus and His Anointed, as the Christ, there is the people to whom we belong, a people called in Greek the ‘assembly,’ the Church. Though most of the earliest

Christians were Jews, within three generations most were ‘Gentiles,’ non-Jews, people of every nationality and race on earth. Among the earliest Christians there were Armenians, Ethiopians, Egyptians and Greeks, and members too of ancient nations and regions no longer recognized until, by the 20th Christian Century, members of this one Church in many branches comprised the most widespread, diverse and numerically largest religious community on earth and in the history of the world.

"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."

Though closely identified with the national identity of some peoples, the Church included and includes Armenians, but not because they are Armenian, and Russians, but not because they are Russian, and Germans,

French, Phlippiños, Poles, Mexicans, Tanzanians, Chinese, Americans, in short *all* other nationalities, but not because they—not because *we*—belong to those nationalities. No, we who have been gathered into this one Church from all the nations of the earth are members of the Church because we belong to *Christ*, and, through Him, to God’s first covenant with Abraham, to God’s plan to bless ‘all the families of the earth.’ To a very observable extent, that blessing has been carried out from Judaism through the one Jew, Jesus, acclaimed and believed by the Church to be the Christ. In almost every nation, and in the United Nations in its *Universal Charter of Human Rights*, the dignity of that humanity into which Jesus was born and that humanity for which He died is affirmed, the Ten Commandments prohibiting idolatry and evil and the Beatitudes

commending mercy being today the twin pillars of what is called ‘civilization.’

It was in and as part of this world that He suffered and died, for *love* of the whole human family. Yet, in thanks for that, He was rejected by His own people and put to death by that civil power that thought it ruled and spoke for the whole world. And today, in a world that is more Christian than it is anything else, there is a measure of reconciliation, at least a respect for peace and mercy in the corridors of power, but savage warfare as a first resort to problem-solving remains all too common.

The world, including the fragile and majestic natural world of animals and plants and the whole ecosphere, can be saved through the same love His Father showed us by giving Him to us and making us part of His Covenant people, but will we let that happen? Are we

willing to make the sacrifices to make that happen? There is much to condemn in our urban, suburban and rural communities, but condemnation of this poor world is not why the Father gave His Son to save the world. Who will stop judging and blaming when wrong has been done or the way of folly has been followed instead of wisdom? Who will instead listen patiently, support the good and build up that of value which has been torn down through selfishness, shortsightedness or simple misunderstanding?

That would indeed be a new way, a new *birth* as Our Lord said to Nicodemus. Though success at every attempt to mirror the Father's love revealed in the Son is not guaranteed, the *blessing* of each attempt to love one another and our home and mother, the Earth, is assured. For, like Abram, not the destination only, but the first step

of the journey, each time we take that step in faith, is a blessing a grace of God. ✠ Amen.



Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. ✠ Amen.

