

“Blessed Family, Blessing Family”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

March 5, 2023 - Second Sunday in Lent

[Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:1-17](#)

“For God so loved the world...” These words from today’s reading from John’s gospel are some of the most beautiful of the many beautiful words of our scriptures. They were words I had to memorize as a child, growing up in a church that emphasized the memorization of Bible verses in its programs for children and youth (in fact, one of my friends memorized not only this verse, but the entire book of John as part of a denominational Bible quizzing program for youth!). And they are words I often recall when facing difficult circumstances...or during football games when someone in the stands holds a sign saying John 3:16 during a field goal attempt. John 3:16 (and 17) are beautiful words that are good to commit to memory and are good to celebrate at football games and every other context for they are words that celebrate God’s amazing, saving love: “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.”

Unfortunately, many who quote these verses do so not in celebration of God’s love for people, but as part of a plan to get people to agree that Jesus is God’s Son so that they can “get

saved” and avoid spending eternity roasting in hell in the afterlife, as though making this simple intellectual agreement is the sole requirement for avoiding a fiery fate. I have come to believe, however, that believing in Jesus means more than just agreeing to a theological point, that Jesus is the divine savior. No, believing, as it always does in our scriptures, means to actively trust, which is not a one-time deal, but a life-long practice. And it is this practice of trusting in God’s love as revealed through Christ that brings us life that does not perish and that can save the world.

In our reading from John, which is the first of several lessons from the fourth gospel that we will hear in coming Sundays, we find Jesus having a conversation with a Pharisee, a Jewish religious leader named Nicodemus, who comes to Jesus at night, likely so that no one would witness them hanging out together. They have a secret conversation that includes the good words about belief and salvation that we’ve just focused on as part of a bigger conversation about the need to be “born again” or “born from above” or “born of the Spirit,” which is part of the trusting experience that brings imperishable life. The good news that Jesus offers Nic at night is that because God so loves the world, we are given opportunities to be made new in spirit, and likewise, because God loves us, our world can experience new birth.

This story of God’s saving love for people was not new to the day (or night) of Jesus and Nicodemus, but was an old, old story

that had been told many times and in many ways by the ancestors of Jesus and Nicodemus. Our first reading from Genesis is one such story. In it, we find Abram, later to be named Abraham, embarking upon on a journey as God had called him to do so. He was then living somewhere in Mesopotamia, but was called to leave that place, his ancestral home, and to leave the ways of worshipping the many gods of the people of that place, and to go where the One unseen God led him. God promised Abram that God would bless him and his family as he went, and that all the families of the world would be blessed through his own blessed family. Abram trusted in God and went on his journey, beginning a new life that would indeed bring God's blessing to all people.

Because God so loved the world, the brokenness of Eden, which we considered at last Sunday's service, was not the end of the story of God and people. Because God so loved the world, the post-Eden wickedness of the world's people and the great flood that washed it away was not the end of the story either.

Because God so loved the world, the post-flood chaos and confusion of Babel was also not to be the final word. From the place of brokenness and chaos, God called a family to begin a new journey away from the curse that people had experienced, living in ways that led them to death, and replacing the curse with blessing from living in ways that lead to more life. The story of the Bible is the story of that journey towards life, the journey towards salvation.

The good news we celebrate this morning is that God still loves the world. God still loves all who are descendants of Abram and Sarai, and God still loves all who claim them as spiritual ancestors. God still calls the children of Abraham and Sarah to go in faith on a journey from brokenness towards life. God loves us and calls us and enables us to be made new in spirit by venturing out in faith.

God loves us and blesses us, and God calls us to carry on the family business of blessing all the world's people. We are called to the work of helping the world to be blessed by being born again. As followers of Christ on this Communion Sunday, we celebrate a symbol that reminds us of our calling to take within ourselves his message and his ways, making them our message and our ways; we make his work of bringing salvation our work of bringing salvation.

So, used by God, we do this saving work, seeking to make the world new by offering messages of love to displace the many messages of hate offered by others. Our journey in faith leads us to continuing Christ's work of feeding the hungry, lifting the lowly, and seeking justice for those who are harmed by injustice (I invite you to come to our Lenten study series beginning this Wednesday at 7 p.m., during which we will learn about the injustice of slavery and how we as a church have acted and can act to address its still-active, ugly legacy). Our active trust in Christ's sacrifice leads us to sacrifice of our own time, talent, and treasure to bless people in the world (I invite you to come

back next Sunday to hear from a speaker from NuDay, an organization we are supporting through our Board of Missions that is working in Syria to provide relief to many people who were impacted by recent earthquakes there). Our journey of faith leads us to teach our children and youth to follow Christ's way of selfless service (next Sunday is also Girl Scouts Sunday, and I hope you can join us as we celebrate the good service of the two troops of Girl Scouts currently meeting at our church).

God so loved the world, God so loves the world, God blessed us, God blesses us, all so that we might love and be a blessing to the world. Let us continue on this journey towards newness that we might find God's imperishable, perfect life dwelling in our own hearts today, tomorrow, and always. Amen.