

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL – 5 March 2023
Second Sunday in Lent - Year A

1st Reading: *Genesis 12:1-4a*

Psalm: 121

2nd Reading: *Romans 4:1-5, 13-17*

Gospel: *John 3:1-17*

Sermon - Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø

In the name of the Father, ✠ and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Story #1: There you are at the movie theatre. You've just settled into your comfy warm recliner and you've started munching on your tasty popcorn, ready for a relaxing and entertaining evening. Up on the screen you read "The following preview has been approved for all audiences", and then you see a sequence of snippets - some funny, some exciting - for a movie you might want to come back to see in a few weeks. But after a couple of minutes of these scenes going by you begin to wonder if you've already seen the best parts of it, and you pretty much already know most of what's going to happen in the film.

Story #2: There you are in your high school English class. Your teacher [that would be Mrs. Schneck in my case] has assigned you to read Shakespeare's play *Julius Ceasar*. Next week, after everyone has read it, you are going to discuss it in class, and there might even be a pop quiz about it. But as the days roll on by, you have so much to do [maybe feeding 5000 chickens] and you are daunted by Shakespeare's English [what does that word even mean?]. The deadline is approaching and you don't have a clue about what is going on in this play. [I don't know about you, but I still have dreams about scenarios like this one all the time.] But then you realise that you're in luck. You pop down to the local book store, and sure enough, there's a rack of Cliffs Notes - those yellow and black booklets - and there's one for *Julius Caesar*! You quickly read through the synopsis - aha, so that's what was going on! - and you hope that there won't be anything in the quiz that wasn't already covered in the Cliffs Notes.

Well, today's readings are kind of like the Cliffs Notes for the Bible. Or maybe they're the two minutes of previews that show you pretty much everything you need to know about what's going to happen in the Bible.

That first scene from Genesis, where God calls Abraham to leave his home country, might still be a little confusing without the big picture, so let's take a closer look. The first few chapters of Genesis deal with all of us, all of humanity, and we start to see a pattern. God gives us a blessing - initially the entire world. But as we read last week with Adam and Eve, we turn away from God and go our own way. This leads to all sorts of terrible consequences. But God comes to our rescue and gives us his grace to resolve the situation. This same cycle is then played out with Cain and Abel, then with the world becoming evil, resulting in the flood. But God rescues Noah and gives mankind grace to start over. And then there is the tower of Babel, with people trying to make themselves great, and the result is that we all became scattered over the whole world into different nations with different languages. We had not only become separated from God, but even more separated from each other.

And how was God to rescue us from this situation? That's where Abraham comes in. God calls one particular person to be the father of a new nation, the nation of Israel, through which God will bless all the other peoples in the world. And that's pretty much the story of the entire Old Testament - God has called the descendants of Abraham to be his agents in his mission to rescue us all from the consequences of our sins.

Psalm 121, a favourite Psalm of many people, expresses our hope and our faith that God does rescue us from trouble, even the trouble of our own sins, and that he continues to give us grace and to take care for us.

And then Paul reflects back on Abraham in his letter to the Romans, emphasising that it was indeed God who called and saved Abraham by his grace, it was not Abraham's own initiative. Abraham had not done anything to earn God's attention, but once God had called him, Abraham put his faith in God and was faithful to God's call. So God's rescue plan was put in motion.

And what was that rescue mission to accomplish? Paul outlines that in the very last sentence of our reading this morning: "it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all those who share the faith of Abraham, in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist". God gives life to those who believe and trust him, even life eternal from death.

And this, of course, is what Jesus speaks about in our reading from John's Gospel, which includes the most quoted verse from the entire Bible. Through that nation of Israel that God had formed from Abraham's descendants to be a blessing to the world, God himself entered the world as a human being: Jesus the Messiah, the "one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man" as Jesus describes himself to Nicodemus.

And why did Jesus descend from heaven to become a human being? To be the ultimate expression of God's grace, to save all of us in the world from our sins, to call into existence the things that do not exist, so that we might be born from above, born of the water of our baptism and of the Holy Spirit, so that we may not perish but have eternal life.

So there we have it - the entire Bible in a nutshell, the Cliffs Notes on the greatest story ever told, the key scenes that give us a preview of everything God wants to show us.

Story #3: There you are, sitting in church and singing hymns to God. Are you here just for a relaxing and entertaining morning, to hear fun stories? Perhaps that is what some people do when they go to church, but I don't think that any of you are here for that reason. Or are you here, nervous about a pop quiz or a fiery test that you are afraid God is going to give you, and so you'd better be sure to study and know all the right answers? Again, I think that some people feel that way when they come to church, and I hope that none of you fit into that category.

No, I think that you are all here to praise the God who calls into existence the things that do not exist. I think that you recognise that our selfish and sinful actions have broken our relationship with God and our relationships with each other, and you want those relationships to be mended. And I think that you have come to hear the good news that God gives us. God has taken the initiative and through his grace has rescued us: "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".

Amen!

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