

The Rev. Joel C. Daniels, PhD
Rector, The Nevil Memorial Church of St. George
Ardmore, Pennsylvania
The Second Sunday of Lent
March 8, 2020

Year A

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

... And Lot went with him

A few months ago, a controversy broke out in the online world—a world primed and seemingly created for fomenting controversy. This one was about a television advertisement for an exercise bike. In the commercial, a man gives his wife a high-tech, very fancy exercise bike for Christmas. She clearly didn't ask for it. She is reluctant to use it. Because it's an ad for the exercise bike company, she eventually becomes an exercise bike expert, and enjoys it, and her life is turned around.

The controversy, however, was about how why, exactly, this husband felt it was right to get his wife an exercise bike for Christmas, particularly when she didn't want it. There was the sense that the ad was condoning the act of men trying to determine what women look like, or forcing them into gender stereotypical roles, or the like. She didn't even want the bike, but, apparently, he thought she needed more exercise. Maybe he should have gotten himself the exercise bike and quit nagging her about working out. The New York Times called the ad "[sexist and dystopian](#)" and reports that the stock for the company fell about 10% in the ensuing days. Such was the controversy.

One of the things the controversy points out, however, is that the giving and receiving of gifts is incredibly complicated and heavily freighted. Gifts can be like that exercise bike one: too nudgy and coming with too many unfair expectations. Or they could be totally generic, having nothing to do with the relationship between the giver and receiver. They can be too late: birthday presents are sometimes belated but giving a child a Christmas present a month late would usually (some exceptions granted) fall short. But they can also be too early: giving someone a birthday present six months beforehand, without justification, seems odd. Gifts can be too small: if the exercise bike man had bought his wife a box of crayons, that wouldn't have been good, either. But they can be too big, such that they make the recipient uncomfortable. Not giving a gift to someone who is expecting it could be hurtful, but giving a gift to someone one barely knows is questionable, too.

Gifts can be too personal or not personal enough; too late or too early; too small or too large; given to the right person and not to the wrong person. They have to be just right for the occasion and the relationship.

We don't usually have to think about this in these terms; we just instinctively know the social conventions that govern this gift exchange. Only when we see errors in our own communities, or see what we consider strange practices in other cultures, might we realize the complexity of these exchanges. In the mid-twentieth century, the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss theorized that gift exchange formed the structure that lies at the heart of human culture, that the right exchange of gifts was the way that human communities formed in the first place, from hunter-gatherers to unified groups (in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*). Whether that's right or wrong, it shows that giving and

receiving gifts can be complicated, because humans are complicated, and their relationships are complicated. Just ask the exercise bike company.

But what if there was someone who stood entirely outside of the economy of gift exchange? Who was not fulfilling a social role, or satisfying an obligation, or offering or expecting any reciprocity at all? But instead gave, without reserve, for no other reason than that giving is his nature? Or who one doesn't give out of appreciation, but just out of gratuitous love? Who doesn't give to friends, to cement relationships, but to friends and enemies alike, without difference? Who gives in this way—completely, entirely, with nothing held back—even to those who hate him? To those who would, given the chance, kill him?

This is the quality of the gift that God gives to Israel, and through Israel to the world, as St. Paul describes it. In Genesis, God comes to Abraham, out of nowhere, and tells him that he is going to give him this gift: to bless him, to make of him a great nation, to make his name great, blessing those who bless him and cursing those who curse him, so that through him all the nations of the world will be blessed.

This promise, this gift, stands at the beginning of the story of Israel, which is also the beginning of the story of the Church. That gift will culminate in the advent of Jesus Christ, who comes to bring life to the entire world—life in this world, and life forever in the world to come. All from the gift that is given to Abraham.

But St. Paul is concerned that we might think that this happened because Abraham was a good person, that God chose the most deserving person to give this great gift to, or that the gift was conditional on Abraham's righteousness—somehow involved in the relational complexity of humans exchanging gifts. But the fulfillment of God's promise to love us and save us and be with us is not conditional, not part of that reciprocity that is found in human relationships, and you can find that in the text of Genesis itself.

Note what happens in the call to Abraham. God appears out of nowhere. He tells Abraham that he's going to do all those things for him: blessing, cursing, making a name great. The way for it to start is for Abraham to leave his "country... kindred ... [and] father's house" to establish this new nation. And, God bless him, Abraham does. The most eloquent and beautiful silence in the Bible is there: Abraham doesn't say anything when God says this; Genesis reports, "So Abram went." What a faithful man! What trust! What righteousness!

But the verse doesn't end with, "So Abram went." It says, "So Abram went ... and Lot [his nephew] went with him." But wait: the directions were for Abraham to go from his family and set off to the new country. The leap of faith Abraham was to take was precisely for him to leave everything else behind. But he doesn't. Even at the very moment of the promise being made, at the very moment when he is to set off on this new life as a follower of God, "Lot went with him."

Paul's reader would have already known what the results of that were. The results were *not* that God rescinded the promise and said, "Actually, never mind, you're no good." The promise had been made and it would be kept, regardless of Abraham's worthiness of it. That said, bringing along Lot against God's instructions would have ripple effects that would plague Abraham for the rest of his life, and the Hebrew nation for centuries. After the two households set off together, years later, Lot's shepherds and Abraham's shepherds start quarreling, which culminates with the two households having to go their own ways. Lot ends up in Sodom, which doesn't go well. Lot has children with his own daughters, which isn't good. And, the descendants of Lot become the Moabites and the Ammonites, who are the blood enemies of Israel for generations; it is impossible to overstate the enmity between the Hebrews and the Moabites and Ammonites. Throughout Scripture, they are the archetypal enemies, the worst of the worst.

God didn't cause these consequences; they were the ripple effects of Abraham's first disobedience of God. But even this doesn't abrogate the promise that was made. These bad

decisions have bad consequences, for sure, but those bad consequences were a result of what Abraham did, not what God did. Even through it all, God maintains the promise that he had made.

Thus St. Paul says that Abraham can't be "justified by works," because his works were mixed. Paul says, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." To "reckon" something is to make an accounting of it, to calculate the credits and debits and come up with a total. Abraham was reckoned righteous, in the final accounting—but not because of his own righteousness. He brought Lot with him! Instead, his engagement with the promise of God ("So Abram went") accounted him righteous enough for the promise. Not because of what he did, but because of who God is.

Lent is a time when we hold both of these things in tension for ourselves. On the one hand, it is a time for self-examination, a realization of all the times when we have taken Lot with us when we shouldn't have, and the way that those acts have had ripple effects through our lives. Lent is when we say how we wish we could call ourselves righteous but are clear-eyed and honest enough to recognize that we aren't. Honesty is the best policy, but it is also a hard policy. Lord, "we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep." We've had choices and with awareness have chosen wrongly, and those choices have hurt us and hurt others. We took Lot with us, and we are taking Lot with us, and it seems impossible to imagine that we will ever get out of that morass of disobedience, which continues to be destructive.

But Lent is also a time when we remember the sureness of God's promise, the way it has been kept throughout salvation history, how the erring and straying lost sheep have been retrieved and brought home. How the prodigal sons and daughters have been given gifts, over and over again, that we do not deserve. Someone standing outside the economy of gift exchange who gives even of himself to give us life, to save us from ourselves and our sin, to, at the end of days, bring us home to him.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, Jesus, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. God didn't send Jesus into the world to condemn the world, simply to show the world how much it didn't deserve to be the recipients of God's gifts—that's the easy part and obvious enough. God gave Jesus so that the world might be saved through him. The world, including us, cannot be saved through us—we cannot save ourselves, because we keep bringing Lot with us. Over and over again, we bring Lot along, even when we know better.

This is the great gift of God, who stands outside the network of human relationships and its obligations and expectations and complications. He brings mercy instead. Instead, he is pure gift. It is a gift so pure that we can hardly conceive of it; maybe that's part of why St. Paul had to write so much. Being reminded of our sin isn't about making us feel guilty. It is about making us realize the necessity, and the realization, of our forgiveness. Even in Lent, rejoice in your forgiveness. Enjoy this great free gift of God.