

SERMON 3-20-11

The Rev. Elizabeth Griswold

Today is the **vernal equinox**, the first day of spring, a day of balance, with equal periods light and darkness.

It's also **Nowruz**, the Persian New Year, which is associated with spring
It's also the Jewish holiday of **Purim**, which celebrates the story in the biblical book of Esther.

As we all know today is also the **Second Sunday in Lent**, the 40-day Christian season of penitence, prayer, and preparation for Easter.

But really, what is today really marked by, beyond all that? Well, today is Sunday, March 20, and it's 11 days before **Opening Day** of the 2011 season of Major League Baseball!

Sports columnist George Vecsey once said:

There is no sports event like Opening Day of baseball, the sense of beating back the *forces* of darkness and the [National Football League](#).

—[George Vecsey](#)^[1]

And I promise you this does tie in to the text this morning too!

It's not just a weak and forced attempt on my part to rehabilitate my undeserved reputation as completely ignorant with regard sports. Though I will admit it is true at Ministries Board meetings when people are online and calling out scores I do often have to ask what game, league, or even what sport they're talking about!

And the connection is not just that two of our closest baseball teams have religious names, the Angels and the Padres.

And it's not just that oftentimes when you're watching a baseball game on tv, when the camera pans crowd, someone might be holding up a sign with a biblical verse on it, which is often what? John 3:16. And of course this verse occurs at the end of our gospel passage today.

I'll explain the baseball connection later. I promise.

But seriously, that verse... "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him shall not die but have eternal life."

Sometimes I wish it stopped right there after the first half about God's love...

For God SO loved the world...

Today's themes are about bold blessings. From the Genesis passage: "all the families of the earth will be blessed."

This is beautiful stuff!

ALL those celebrating spring, and Nowruz, and Purim, and Lent, and even baseball...are divinely loved and divinely blessed.

To dive more deeply into these texts, first this psg from **Genesis** is a favorite passage of mine. For one of my finals in seminary, I had to write it out all in Hebrew. So I got to know this passage intimately!

This story of God's conversation with Abram (before his name was changed to Abraham) immediately follows the lists of Abram's genealogy...

So the reader would notice this strong juxtaposition with God's command:

"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house."

In Hebrew the first phrase in this passage is "*Lekh lekha.*"

In English we miss out on the strength of the original meaning. The command comes from the Hebrew word *halakh*, which means to walk or to go.

And it is emphasized here in the second-person imperative. "Go, take yourself."

A friend of mine who's undocumented says it's the diff between being a temporary pilgrim to a holy site and really being an immigrant.

It's the difference between having **belief**, or a sense of intellectual assent:

Abram didn't just say "I believe in you, God." That's not what God asks for.

And he didn't just have **hope** and pray that God is real or that God's will be done.

Abram had real **faith**.

In Pali, the language of the first sutras, the written passages of the Buddha's teachings, the word for faith is defined as "the courageous heart's movement forward into the darkness of the unknown."

So Abram had faith and followed God, left his former life behind, and headed out.

Hebrew Bible professor Richard Lowery observes, "It is also worth noting that Abraham, with God's guidance is migrating away from the center of economic, political, and military power in the ancient world to settle in the hinterland. Ironically, the blessing of the whole earth will begin not from the center of power and influence, but at the distant margins."

Midrash is a literary genre in Jewish tradition in which rabbis and scholars fill in the gaps in biblical passages and create stories that explained unexplained phenomena.

And one of most famous stories of midrash states that Abram's father was an idol maker. And one day Abram took a bat and smashed all the idols in his father's workshop then left the bat in the hand of the largest one.

When his father came home and asked what happened, Abram said there had been a fight and the big one won. His father responded that their just inanimate objects. So then Abram, whose own monotheistic faith in the one true God had been growing, questioned, "Well then, why do you worship them?"

This story is a way of explaining how Abram created a situation in which he then had to leave. It's a metaphor and was a way for him to smash the idols in his life, the idols of:

*security

*only caring about the nuclear family

*greed and consumerism above following the one true God

And that's what Abram left behind when he headed out into the unknown.

And even though in the biblical version Abram is 75, God tells him God will make of him a great nation. And God adds that in Abram *all* the nations of the earth will be blessed. Or in another way of translating this Hebrew word *nivrekhu* is: "In you, all the nations of the earth will **bless themselves.**"

What does it mean that way? What does it mean for people to bless themselves?

It's like that old saying, the difference between

***charity**: blessing other people: giving them a fish

***self-sufficiency**: helping people bless themselves: teaching them to fish.

*Then there comes **justice**: I heard this explanation at a CLUE meeting last week:

What about when someone else puts up a fence around the pond? How do we come alongside folks and stand in solidarity when they are kept from blessing themselves?

What do we do when we are confronted with such situations as the terrible three-fold tragedy in **Japan**: earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear radiation?

What do we do in the case in **Libya**, of a dictator making war on his own civilian citizens?

With Japan, we have the opportunity to give until it hurts with our One Great Hour of Sharing offering in two weeks.

And as we commemorate the eighth year of war in Iraq, I was marching in LA yesterday, and saw Dean Inada of course, and tonight at 6pm we'll vigil at the corner.

And as our country begins strikes on Libyan air defenses, I think perhaps the only prayer we can offer is what a Buddhist friend of mine posted recently on Facebook,

"Let us pray that as little blood as possible might be shed in Libya"

as we look at the idols that lead all of us as world citizens to make war against each other and as we work to tear down all the fences that keep some away from the pond of peace and justice and abundant living.

The writer **Laurel Dykstra**, who I know through the Catholic Worker movement, says about Lent and repentance, “We act as if our greatest sins were watching too much TV or eating too many chocolates. By ‘giving them up for Lent,’ we continue to participate in the culture of consumption and individualism with a program of self-improvement.

[But] Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote,

‘Repentance is an absolute, spiritual decision made in truthfulness. Its motivations are remorse for the past **and responsibility** for the future.’ Could this be so for us?

On the surface, it might not look so different. We might still put down the chocolate bar and turn off the television, but we might also talk about our cultural addiction to spectacle, or forced child labor in the chocolate industry. Lent might look different if together we supported and created alternative media. And, rather than trading our sodas for bottled water, we stood with indigenous women defending their sacred waters.” --That might be how we tear down the fences!

And now, just to touch briefly on the gospel passage, I’ll draw the parallels between our two stories that Nicodemus, like Abram:

* also learns here through **conversation**,

*that he, like Abram, is also called to a faith that requires him to make **significant change in his life**,

*and also that this passage can be read quite differently depending on how we **interpret or translate its terms**.

This is the passage from which we get the expression “**born again**,” from the Greek word *anōthen*.

Interestingly, as Ken Wyant pointed out in Bible Study this week, this phrase is often cited by biblical literalists, but in this passage Jesus uses this phrase to teach against literalism!

With what is often translated as “born again,” the better translation that Jesus really meant is, “**You must be born from above.**”

We must be born from God in a way that changes us and our priorities, born from above in a way that smashes the idols in our lives, and sends us out on a journey of faith.

What does that journey look like at this point in time for us as a congregation?

You may not be surprised to hear me say that I think it is very closely related to the leap of faith we are taking with starting our new alternative service, **Bread for the Journey, Sundays at 5pm.**

We're taking a step on our own journey into the unknown in an attempt to provide a space where others get sustenance for their own journeys, where others find a space to **ble**s**s themselves** and find a way to be **born from above.**

And finally, to tie this all back into something *really* important and to remind us what we're commemorating today, I offer you a clip from the movie "Field of Dreams," about someone else who makes a great leap of faith. *****

In the movie, Ray, very much like Abram, listens to a supernatural call, he smashes the idols of his own security, he strikes out into the unknown in a leap of great faith, and he makes it possible for others to bless themselves through him, and also...unlike Abram, in the end Ray actually rehabilitates his broken relationship with his father!

Wow, a good baseball movie says it all!

Amen.