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Second Sunday in Lent

March 16, 2014

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Reading 1:

Genesis 12:1-4a

Reading 2:

Psalm 121

Reading 3:

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

Reading 4:

John 3:1-17

By Marjorie Suchocki

Once again the Lenten texts take us through salvation history, starting this time with Abram called to journey in faith "to a land that I will show you," to the Psalmist's confident faith in God's unfailing care, to Paul's emphasis on faith's role in salvation, to the quintessential Johannine confession of faith, "God so loved the world..."

One could focus on any one of the texts individually or else take them collectively.

Individually, the Abram (not yet Abraham) story takes us to the adventure/danger of many of life's beginnings. One receives a call--to a new profession? a new partner? a new place? The known situation is comfortable, familiar: how do we dare take the challenge of the new? The texts suggest that faith provides that courage, whether faith in the one who calls us to take the new step, or faith in the promised consequences--or perhaps both.


The Apostle Paul relates Abraham's faith to justification. Paul argues that it is not so much the fact that Abraham actually did what God called him to do, but the fact that Abraham had enough faith to take that step in the first place that makes Abraham a righteous man. James will later argue that faith without the resultant works of faith is meaningless, whereas for Paul it is more the case that faith is all-encompassing, embracing within itself the seeds of the works that follow. But even there, it's not as if faith is the beginning and works the consequent; rather, faith and works are inseparable: faith impels works that exemplify faith, like the two sides of a coin.

What of the text from John? The context is quite different from either the Genesis or Romans text; the distinction between faith and works is not the issue here. The key verse, of course, is the beloved John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that God gave the only son, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life." Many read the text as if it read ". . . have everlasting life," but the text actually says "eternal life," which is very significant in this gospel. "Everlasting life" connotes life beyond one's physical death, and this indeed is one of the teachings of Christian faith. But that is not the central meaning of John's "eternal life," In this gospel, God is eternal; God IS eternal life, and the eternal life of God is a sending love that gives to the other. God is Love. From this very being of God there is the sending of the Son with the sole aim that we shall through him open ourselves to God, whereupon God's love flows into us unhindered, shaping and forming our own loves to greater conformity with the love of God--which is, of course, sharing in God's love for the world, seeking the world's well-being.

There is a bit of a tension in the four gospels concerning what scholars call "realized eschatology" and "future eschatology." Eschatology means "the last things," and the question is whether these last things take place in

the future, beyond death, in heaven and/or hell, or whether the "last" things are in fact present things, ways of living now in such a way that God's future is pulled into present. Another way of saying it is through the phrase, "the kingdom of God." Is God's kingdom something that happens in the future, or now? In the gospel of John, whether or not a future of God's full reign shall come to pass is less important than that God shall reign now in the way we live. John 3:16 claims that the very essence of God--infinite eternal love--can enter into us now such that we LIVE God's love in all our being, in all our doing, in all our days. This is the eternal life that defies the many forms of perishing.

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