

Lent 2
Genesis 12:1-4a
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17
John 3:1-17

Born Anew

A couple of weeks ago, the movie *Chocolat* was on TV. It had been awhile since I'd seen it and as I wanted to avoid during chores, watching it seemed like the perfect way to pass the time. If you haven't seen it or read the book, it's about this mysterious woman and her young daughter who come to this remote, provincial French village, where life is very tranquil and calm, perhaps even a little bit boring. And depending on one's view, it is either steeped in, or weighted down, by tradition.

And a big reason for this, is that the mayor of the village, runs it with an iron grip, almost to the point of micro-managing people's lives, including the young Roman Catholic priest of the town church, whose sermons the mayor goes over every week prior to Sunday, to make sure they contain all the points he feels they should. One can only imagine Mayor Sanders doing that with all of us who preach here.

Anyway, when this woman and her daughter arrive, the mayor is suspicious. First off, she doesn't have a husband and seems perfectly happy with that arrangement. Second, she doesn't (and won't) go to

church, and third, and probably the most egregious, she opens up a chocolate shop during Lent, which she leaves open on Sundays, both of which absolutely horrify him. At first the mayor tries to talk her out of opening the shop, at least during Lent and when that doesn't work, he does everything he can to make sure her shop isn't successful.

But he fails.

For anyone willing to brave the mayor's wrath, the woman offers him or her free chocolates. But not just any chocolate. She has this uncanny ability to determine what kind of chocolate will bring people the greatest happiness in their lives, and then gives it to them. Afterwards their lives begin to change.

There is the couple who for years have had this passionless marriage, and after each of them eat a particular piece of chocolate, they start looking at each other in ways they haven't for years—much to their great joy. Another woman is finally able to leave an abusive marriage and becomes a happy independent person. And as more of these kinds of stories start to reach the mayor, he becomes increasingly enraged.

But what she's offering is something he can't complete with, and that is the opportunity for new or renewed lives. In the name of tradition, what the mayor is doing is causing the village and all those who live in it to stagnate, to almost have the life squeezed out of them.

Now the mayor isn't a bad man and he wants to do a good job, because he cares for the people and the village very much. But he is also a man ruled by fear and tries to control that fear by freezing time.

But in doing so, he runs up against an inescapable fact of human nature, and that is, human beings are not meant to stay still, facing backwards.

We are now in the second week of Lent, a penitential season in which we are asked to search our hearts and lives in order to consider deeply those things that keep us from knowing, and following, God more closely. And one of the most basic things that keep us from doing just that, is fear. Fear of what the future holds, fear of what others will think of us, fear of failure, fear of the unknown, fear of letting go of something, or someone, whose time with us is past.

The list goes on and on, but the end result is often the same: our fears can keep us mired in the past, anxious about the future and unable to enjoy or at least fully experience the present. Our lives grow smaller when they could be growing bigger. And when that happens, as our vision shrinks, we can miss the very real presence of God, even when it is right in front of us.

But letting go of fear can be a very difficult thing to do.

Much is often made of Nicodemus coming to see Jesus under the cover of night, that he approaches Jesus from a place of darkness. And I think we tend to focus on this aspect of the story because it is a place many of us approach Jesus as well. But as we see Nicodemus struggle with what Jesus is trying to tell him, we are reminded that it can be rather disorienting, and even painful, to enter a bright space after being in the dark.

So for Nicodemus to not quite get what Jesus is saying is not surprising. Because to accept Jesus message, really his gift, of being born anew, of being saved—not from Hell and damnation, but from those things we do, or allow to be done, that keep us from the love of God, means Nicodemus, and by extension, all of us, have to leave the protective

covering of the dark, of life as we know it, and venture into the light place, a place where the “wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.”ⁱ A place God very clearly controls and we don’t.

And in order to do that, we have to let go of what can be, our own iron grip upon those fears that do separate us from God.

While certainly not the only one, this season is a time set aside for us to examine such things. To examine how our fears fuel our actions, inactions, desires for power and control, and can keep us in denial about the true state of our walk with God.

However, at the same time, as tempting as it might be for at least some of us who engage in this examination, it is not meant to be a time of recrimination, guilt, shame and or condemnation. It is no more helpful to make an idol of our fears than it is to deny their existence. Rather, we do it to help prepare to us to come into the light—to become reacquainted with God, to see God in people and places we haven’t before, in those we’ve forgotten and those we have been reluctant to go to.

The good news of course, is that we don't, and in fact probably couldn't, make this examination alone. In Jesus, we see the face of God, feel God's touch, and hear God's words, coaxing us forward, empowering us to not only see our fears, but to learn from them and move past them. And throughout it all, regardless of what is uncovered, loving us fully, to the very core of our being.

Towards the end of *Chocolat*, the young parish priest, finally free from the mayor's iron grip, and his own fear of being himself—the man and priest he was created him to be, finds not only his own voice but his passion as well. He says in his Easter day sermon: “I want to talk about Christ's humanity, I mean how he lived his life on earth: his kindness, his tolerance. We must measure our goodness, not by what we don't do, what we deny ourselves, what we resist, or who we exclude. Instead, we should measure ourselves by what we embrace, what we create, and who we include.”

While not a traditional Lenten sentiment, it is nonetheless is an apt one, for it we cannot love what God has created, we will never even begin to understand the last journey Jesus made to Jerusalem.

The beauty of being born again of the spirit is that all of us can live the lives we have been given more fully, knowing that whatever happens, we will always have God's presence, grace and immeasurable love to ground us, hold us up, teach us and inspire us. Which in turn makes it possible for us to be not only be braver than we would be otherwise, but open and willing to wait for what God has promised is yet to come.

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ⁱ John 3:8a (NRSV)