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

March 8, 2020  
The Second Sunday of Lent

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Over the last few weeks, Dwayne and I have been watching a show on Amazon Prime called "The Man in the High Castle." It has quickly become one of my favorite all time shows.

The story takes place in the 1960's and premise is this...what if the United States had lost WWII? When the show starts, we find a world where the former United States of America is now divided. The East Coast to the Rocky Mountains is occupied by the Nazis. It is now known as the American Reich. And, the Rocky Mountains to the West Coast is occupied by Japan, otherwise known as the Pacific States.

The atrocities of both sides have now befallen what was once our free nation. There is no life beyond the life of the law given by these two regimes. Democracy is a hazy memory and "goodness" is now a dictate of the powerful, a tool to define one's worth based upon artificial standards of purity and national loyalty. Life is only valued in as much as it supports the interests of each side.

But, digging deeper we learn that there are parallel worlds that exist (a sci-fi twist to the plot) where history looks quite different depending on which world you are in. One of these alternative worlds is seen through film footage distributed by an underground resistance group that show America winning the war, where peace prevails and love abounds. The people in the American Reich and the Pacific States start to realize that there is indeed another way.

What if they don't have to live in a world of hate and violence and oppression? What if people started to stand up for something better?

Two characters emerge as central to the story. The first is John Smith who was once an American soldier but turned sides when the German victory was inevitable and becomes the leader of the American Reich. And, then there is the individual known as the Man in the High Castle, the one distributing the films, pushing for resistance and new life. We eventually find out his name is Abe (a not so subtle reference to Abraham in our readings today).

As the story progresses John begins to wrestle with the choices he has made, the people he has harmed, the liberty he has forfeited.

John eventually captures Abe, the Man in the High Castle, and while Abe is in prison we hear him recite two critical biblical references that ground our story...

From Psalm 18, "Jehovah is my rock in whom I take refuge."

And, from John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son."

John Smith listens and confronts Abe about these other worlds, these other ways. You begin to see his desperation as he starts to recognize the depravity of his choices. Can't we make life different he begs? Can't we go to those other worlds and live?

Abe is direct. You can't travel to another world, a better world, unless you die to your current life. As Abe explains, you can't exist in both. You can't exist in a world of hate and a world of love. You have to give up something.

Indeed, the point is clear....we can live in a different world, we can live in a different way, a better way, but it takes a radical recommitment, a death of the old self and a rebirth of the new self. A letting go of sin and accepting redemption.

I love the parallels of this show with our readings because it gives us a tangible way to think about the struggle Nicodemus is going through as he wrestles with this central question...what does it really mean to be reborn?

There are a couple of important clues about this new life throughout our lectionary readings today.

The first is from Genesis as God sends forth Abraham. He charges Abraham to be a blessing, to go out and create nations based upon God's love. That's in essence what God envisions for the world...We are blessed so that we can be a blessing. That's the foundation to new life.

And then, we learn a little more about Abraham from Paul, in his letter to the church in Rome, where he states that Abraham believed this directive from God, this new way of living. And it was understood that carrying out God's desire for us, our new way of life, was to be based not on human laws but upon our faith in God. That's the key building block for new life.

As our character Abe says from his prison cell, "Jehovah is my rock in whom I take refuge." I'm putting all of my life in God's hands, in God's grace. I want to live with this foundation. I want to live not by the law of man but by faith in God.

As Jesus is talking to Nicodemus, this is what he is trying to convey...if you put your life in God's hands, you can't also put it in the world's hands. Those two parallel worlds can't exist together. You have to be reborn to a new way of living and believing. You reject the old, you let it go, you turn away from the things that have harmed you and have harmed others. You commit to something better. You turn and you live.

The Good News is that we all have that choice no matter what our lives may have looked like in the past. I love that our Gospel reading for today goes beyond the familiar words of John 3:16 and expands our understanding of the possibility of this rebirth which is grounded not only in

our decision to follow a new way but is solidified by the incredible expanse of God's love and desire for all of us to turn our lives around. As John 3:17 states, "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."

The world might be saved. All of us. So, if you think you have gone too far away from goodness and grace, if you think you have sinned one too many times, or hurt others beyond repair; if you have beaten yourself up for not being the kind of person you know God wants you to be...God says come to me. Let me be your rock and your refuge. Because you are my beloved...and I gave my only begotten son for you.

You can live in a different world, no matter how you may have lived in the past, because that is what grace is all about. We just have to be willing to be born again, to a new way of life, a life of the Spirit and a life of love and a life of forgiveness. Thanks be to God. Amen.