

## Second Sunday of Lent

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RCL: Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17 or Matthew 17:1-9 LM:  
Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 33:4-5, 18-19, 20, 22; 2 Timothy 1:8b-10; Matthew 17:1-9

This Sunday's readings offer us "the Gospel in a nutshell," as one description has characterized John 3:16: "God so loved the world." God's concern is for the whole of creation and for all people.

This Sunday the prayer of the church should particularly relate to the concerns for people around the globe, for hungry and oppressed people, for refugees, and for the environment. If God is so in love with creation, we should be too and show it in prayer that points to opportunities to express that love. The recent theory that there are only "six degrees of separation" between me and any other person reminds us that by God's creative grace we are connected to one another, blessed by God's own Beloved One offered for our redemption.

The Gospel text contains the image, from the book of Numbers, of the serpent held before the people of Israel so that they could be healed. A serpent wrapped around a pole is the symbol for physicians, gifted with the skills of healing. Perhaps this sign of healing, intended for all who would look, reminds us that God intends healing for all people. One current challenge to our faith and imaginations and commitment of resources is to ensure quality healthcare for all people. This is inevitably a political as well as an economic question that calls us to advocacy.

A doctor from Tanzania once visited our area for ten weeks, going from one congregation to another. He was astounded at our medical facilities, not to mention the general level of wealth in the United States. Visiting an emergency room with each patient area equipped with oxygen outlets in the wall, he told how his hospital, with 200 beds, had only two oxygen tanks, and one always had to be on ready in the surgery unit. He heard the litany "God bless America" and was puzzled. "God has already blessed you so much. Do you want more?"

The lesson from Genesis recounts God's call and promise to Abraham. As I write this reflection, the Middle East is in terrible turmoil again, as Israeli and Palestinian contend for the land of Abraham with great violence and increasing hatred. World history involves constant struggles to control land. The psalmist's affirmation "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it" (Ps 24:1) ought to be the bottom line, but regretfully it is not. God's promise indeed connects blessing with land, but only in the broader intent that "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." The blessing is God's to give, for the sake of the recipient and all people, together residing on the land God gives and loves. We are to be the agents of that blessing, using God's land to produce blessing for all people, not simply the few, the privileged, the powerful. From that land can come abundance and life-giving food.

In one Lutheran Synod anti-hunger advocates came up with the idea to “Give an Abraham,” meaning to contribute five dollars to the church’s hunger appeal. This rings with the implications of giving so that others may be blessed and calls people beyond the pocket-change mentality of contributing. Since a different Abraham (Lincoln) is on that five-dollar bill, the appeal might evoke some of the heritage of Lincoln and his healing words for the nation in his second inaugural address, as the Civil War wound to its conclusion.

Moses finally viewed that “promised land” from the top of Mount Nebo, overlooking the Jordan Valley, the Dead Sea, and the mountains of eastern Israel. On a clear day you can’t see forever, but you can make out Jerusalem, tucked away on the summits in the distance. At this overlook on Mount Nebo a sculpture has been raised—a serpent entwined into a cross. This reminder of the healing serpent of the wilderness, and for Christians the healing power of the cross of Christ, casts a shadow of hope and promise over a land so beset by trouble. There is conflict, animosity, hunger, sickness, and a host of other ills arising out of both nature’s geography and fickle weather patterns and humankind’s sinful assertions. Yet God’s promise is that there will be blessing for all the families of the world God loves. There will be healing and salvation, because the Son is lifted up in sacrifice and triumph. Eternity and the world and each of our lives are still in God’s hands. (Roman Catholic Lectionary readings for the Second Sunday of Lent are traditionally of the Transfiguration, this year from Matthew 17:1-9. See Transfiguration Sunday for this year, pp. 54–56).

### *Children’s Time*

John 3:16 is so well known that some good, concrete, visual, sensory experiences would help. “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands” is a song easily sung by every age, with room for a great creativity (perhaps finding some less gender-specific language) and flexibility in verses that can express what is on the hearts and minds of the local community in facing the issues of their moment. I’ve used a blown-up beach ball on which the world is imprinted, passing it around as we sing, giving everyone a sense that they are God’s steward, with the world literally in their hands. Another option is to have people hold the globe and offer a prayer. Children, especially, can relate to these activities, and it is good way to do a “children’s message” that involves everybody.

### *Musical Suggestions*

The Church of Christ, in Every Age—LBW 433 God, Who Stretched the Spangled Heavens—LBW 463 Take My Life, that I May Be—LBW 406 O God of Mercy, God of Light—LBW 425 Christ is Alive! Let Christians Sing—LBW 363 Listen, God is Calling—WOV 712 The Spirit Sends Us Forth to Serve—WOV 723 Blest are They—WOV 764 Go, My Children, with My Blessing—WOV 721 Creator God, Who Gives the Earth—BP 191 Hope of the World—BP 176 God of the Universe—BP 162