

The Lutheran Church of the Atonement
Florissant, Missouri
Lent II -- Year A
March 4-5, 2023
Genesis 12:1-4a; St. John 3:1-17
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

God...doesn't...owe...you...anything! That's where every discussion about God should begin. That's where all good theology must begin. That's where our every day should begin,...and where it should end. God ... doesn't... owe... you ...anything!

It should, in so many ways, be self-evident that the Great God Who created the heavens and the earth, Who formed the most distant galaxies, and Who designed the tiniest particles of atom doesn't owe us anything. And, yet, how many discussions don't we have, the underlying assumption of which is this: that God owes me a lifetime of good health; that God owes me a good livelihood; that God owes me harmonious relationships, or -- my personal favorite -- that God owes me an explanation? I could make a dent in our congregational shortfall, if I had that proverbial "nickel" for every sentence I've heard that began with the dependent clause, "If God really were good,..." as though we get to decide what "good" is and then hold God to that standard. (Echoes of the serpent in Genesis 3: "...and you will determine what is 'good' and what is 'evil.'") Am I sounding crabby here? I hope not!

But, this whole concept of what God does or doesn't "owe" us is clearly introduced in today's Second Lesson from the writings of Paul. In fact, Paul uses that very word in verse 4, ὀφείλημα, "what is owed." That same concept is suggested in today's Gospel Lesson, as Nicodemus comes to Jesus late at night, looking for explanations and asking, "How can these things be?" And, it is clearly present in today's First Lesson, where God comes to an older man, whose name means "exalted father" and yet has no children. On the one hand, God is very specific about what Abram will leave behind: his land, his family, and his

father's home. On the other hand, God is utterly vague as to where He is taking Abram, simply "to the place I will show you" -- as if to say, "I don't owe you a road map; I don't owe you an itinerary; I don't owe you an explanation; just do what I tell you. I don't owe you anything!"

From time to time, that same Paul writes about being judged "in a human court." And, it makes one wonder about how much of our human discourse about the nature and the will and the Word of God -- whether one is speaking of the God of the Bible or of some other more loosely-defined deity -- isn't simply an unspoken attempt to put that "God" on trial. In fact, about 50 years ago, the famed British author C. S. Lewis used that every image -- although he used classic British courtroom language. He wrote an essay, which eventually became a book, entitled *God in the Dock*, referring to that place in a criminal courtroom where the defendant was required to stand and to listen to the accusations against him: God as the accused; God as the defendant; God as debtor; God put "on trial."

What an extraordinary role reversal has taken place in our world, in that so many of our contemporaries truly believe that we are in no way accountable to Almighty God for our actions, our behaviors, or our attitudes, but that God is somehow acceptable to us. On so many levels that is just stunning!!! Paul would be flabbergasted! In large part, because Paul's own theology begins -- and ends -- with his own unworthiness. Paul clearly comprehends -- and freely and frequently acknowledges -- that God doesn't "owe" him anything. Indeed, this is the same Paul who had openly mocked the Word of the God Who had raised Jesus from the dead. Paul had openly persecuted those who believed and trusted that, in Jesus, God had sent His only-begotten Son. No, God didn't "owe" Paul anything. Nor did God "owe" Abram progeny or a promise. Nor did Jesus "owe" Nicodemus any explanations, when Nicodemus came to

Him under cover of night, quizzing Jesus on what He was up to, in effect, putting Jesus "in the dock." But, that's what makes all their stories so extraordinary, so compelling. That the God Who "owed" them nothing, that the God Who "owes" us nothing, nonetheless gives us...(let me back up)....

John 3:16 has been used and abused in so many ways, from "Dancing Harry" at sporting events to cheap plastic glow-in-the-dark jewelry, that it has become all all-too-familiar cliché, a mantra, a truism, a one-size-fits-all slogan which can "go in one ear and out the other." Yet, for John, this verse (and verse 17 which follows it) summarizes this late-night encounter between Nicodemus, demanding answers, and Jesus, who simply wants to open up Nicodemus to the new thing that God is doing in-and-through Jesus. For only when Nicodemus -- and you and I -- finally come to the realization that God doesn't "owe" us anything, can the words of John 3:16 and 17 begin to touch our hearts and transform our lives. "For God (the creator of heaven and earth, Who formed the distant galaxies and designed the smallest particles of the atom; yes, that God) so loved the world (this broken, cantankerous, rebellious world, which God has created out of His love and which had so quickly turned its back on God) that He gave His only-begotten Son (the most precious thing He had to offer, His own Son, giving Him up to die at the hands of brutal Roman executioners) so that everyone (and anyone!) who (simply) believes in Him may not perish, but have eternal life (which is to say, the life of God's glorious new age to come)."

Then, John restates it, with emphasis, so that we can more fully comprehend what this means: "God sent His Son into the world, not to condemn the world (which would have been the reasonable thing to do, given the world's arrogant disobedience and smug self-righteousness) but in order that the world might

be saved (rescued, restored, re-created, and brought back to its loving God) through Him!"

All of this is true, Paul wants us to understand, not because we are entitled to it, not because God "owes" it to us, but because it is God's gift to us. Everything we have, everything we are, every hope, every dream, every second chance we get; it's all a gift, given solely because God "so loves" you.

For, God...doesn't...owe...you...anything! That's where every discussion about God should begin. That's where all good theology must begin. That's where every day should begin -- and where it should end. "God...doesn't...owe...you...anything!"
.....And, gives you everything! Amen