

Date: March 16, 2014  
Scriptures: Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:1-17  
Title: Gifts Seen and Unseen

New Orleans is a wonderful town,  
and we had a wonderful time there.  
The gift of time away  
gave me the opportunity  
to read some good books,  
eat lots of great seafood,  
listen to some amazing music,  
and see some interesting sights.

It was a great vacation  
even though things did not go  
exactly as we planned.  
George's work took him away for two days,  
and we both got sick.  
But, we refused to let  
those minor inconveniences spoil our joy.  
For the gift of time away,  
I thank you.

Have you ever noticed  
that some people have a tendency  
to minimize both gifts and givers?  
Perhaps, we do that,  
because we incorrectly think  
that gifts indebted us to the giver,  
and very few of us  
like to be indebted  
to another person.

Yet, isn't the idea  
that our good is bound up  
with the good of others  
at the heart of our democratic  
way of life?

And more importantly,  
the giving of good gifts  
is an essential characteristic

of our gracious God.  
The giving of good gifts for no other reason  
than the desire to give to another is a holy act.  
Both of today's scripture readings give us  
an intimate glimpse of God's generous heart.  
In the First Reading,  
God gives Abraham a promise,  
a promise that through his righteous acts  
he will be a blessing  
to all the nations of the world.  
In the Second, we hear  
that God's great love for the world  
leads God to give the world  
the only begotten son.  
What is suggested in the First Reading  
is clearly stated in the Second ~  
love is the basis of every good gift.

Perhaps, you have seen the video  
of three-year-old Emily James  
that went viral last week.  
Realizing that Emily's long hair  
was becoming impractical to keep,  
her mother told her  
about a decision she had made  
when she was in high school.  
She cut her hair and donated it  
to children with cancer,  
who had lost their hair.  
When Emily heard her mother's story,  
she decided she, too, wanted to cut her hair  
and donate it to children with cancer.  
She also wanted her doll, Rapunzel,  
to get her hair cut.  
In the video, Emily says,  
"I don't want any kids to be sad  
that they have no hair.  
What I want to do is give them my hair."  
Emily's decision, prompted by her mother's story,

was an outrageous act  
of love and mercy.  
After Emily's hair was her hair cut,  
her mother explained,  
"We hope to instill an attitude of giving  
in all our kids.  
We want them to realize  
that everything we have  
is a blessing from God  
and it is really important to give to others  
when we can."

([www.today.com/moms/3-year-olds-haircut...](http://www.today.com/moms/3-year-olds-haircut...)).

Sadly, there are times in our lives  
when we do not recognize the gift  
or the giver.  
Nicodemus is such a person.  
He is in the dark.  
It is a darkness caused  
by what he knows  
and doesn't know.  
His worldview prevents him  
from receiving the gift  
Jesus has for him.  
To help Nicodemus see the gift in front of him,  
Jesus tells him  
he must be born again.  
Now, Nicodemus is a practical man.  
He knows he cannot  
enter his mother's womb again.  
Yet, it is his practicality, his mindset, his worldview  
that keeps him from hearing  
Jesus' invitation to be born again  
by being born from above  
through water and the Spirit.

We may wonder about Nicodemus' inability  
to comprehend what Jesus is saying to him.  
We live in a culture steeped in "born again" language.

When we hear “born again,”  
we understand its meaning.  
We understand that what is meant  
is a re-orientation of heart and mind  
through the power of the Holy Spirit.  
That understanding  
was not abroad in the culture  
when in darkness  
Nicodemus went to see Jesus.

While we may get it,  
we are not so very different from Nicodemus.  
We, too, voice our incredulity of those things  
that do not conform to our world view,  
our understanding of right and wrong,  
our perception of truth.

The book, *My Name Is Asher Lev*,  
tells the story of Asher Lev’s struggle  
to be true to his deepest self.

While still a child,  
Asher discovers a passion  
and a rare talent for art.

In many families such a discovery  
would be met with acceptance,  
if not joy and celebration.

But, not in Asher’s family,  
for they are Hasidic Jews,  
and Asher’s father is a special envoy for the Rebbe,  
the spiritual leader  
of the community.

Asher’s father views artists with suspicion  
and fears art will lead Asher  
away from the faith  
and into darkness.

Asher’s determination to pursue an art career  
gives rise to a bitter and acrimonious feud  
between his father and him.

Frequently, Asher’s mother is triangulated  
into the situation

with both husband and son  
pulling on her to at least  
remedy the situation  
or better yet,  
make it go away  
completely.

Years later, as a young artist  
with several NY shows behind him,  
Asher conceives and creates a painting  
of what it must have been like for his mother  
to have been pulled on  
by the two people she loved.

He paints her hanging  
on the living room window in their apartment  
with her arms stretched out to her sides  
and her legs hanging down.

On one side of her is her husband;  
on the other, her son.

They are looking at her and each other.

Asher says he created the painting  
“For all the pain you suffered,  
my momma.

For all the torment  
of your past and future years,  
my momma.

For all the anguish this picture  
will cause you.

For the unspeakable mystery  
that brings good fathers and sons into the world  
and lets a mother watch them  
tear each other’s throats.

For the Master of the Universe,  
whose suffering world  
I do not comprehend. . . .

For all of these I created this painting –  
an observant Jew working on a crucifixion  
because there was no aesthetic mold  
in (my) own religious tradition

into which I could pour  
a painting of ultimate  
anguish  
and torment.”

Asher's painting creates a breach in his relationship  
with his parents,  
his family,  
and the people in his faith community.

The Rebbe tells Asher  
he has crossed a boundary  
and is now beyond his help.

Then, he suggests  
that Asher leave New York City  
and go to Paris,  
which he does  
less than twenty-four hours later.

Asher leaves,  
because those he loves the most deeply  
cannot receive the gift he has for them.

They cannot see,  
because the cross is an anathema to them.

As God gave Jesus  
to bless the world and her people,  
so through Jesus God sends people  
with their own unique gifts  
into our lives to bless us.

Yet, we sometimes hesitate  
to accept the gift,  
and we are sometimes hesitant  
to welcome the giver.

We allow our worldview,  
our understanding of right and wrong,  
our perception of truth  
to turn us away from the person  
and the gifts they offer.

When we do that,  
we not only wound the person,

but we also diminish  
our world and ourselves.

We can be certain

that God is always working in our lives  
to open us to good gifts  
and the ones who offers them.

As we are opened up,

we are enabled to live into our lives  
with hope, kindness, and mercy.

This, dearly beloved, is the blessing way of God,  
for God came to shine light  
in the dark places of our world  
and each of us. Amen.