

"Those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the Gospel, will save it."

Lent II

Romans 4:13-25

13 For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

16 For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, ¹⁷as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations')—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. ¹⁸Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become 'the father of many nations', according to what was said, 'So numerous shall your descendants be.' ¹⁹He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. ²⁰No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. ²²Therefore his faith 'was reckoned to him as righteousness.' ²³Now the words, 'it was reckoned to him', were written not for his sake alone, ²⁴but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, ²⁵who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

One of my favorite kinds of stories—whether in books or film—is the tale of uncovering the 'real' story behind something. My favorite novel, for example, has this as its subject: *Great Expectations*. Do you remember this? Pip, an orphaned boy working as an apprentice for a blacksmith, suddenly receives a sponsor, who provides all of the funding necessary to move into a much more comfortable life in London...but with one stipulation. He cannot know who his sponsor is! His guesses, of course, are all wrong; and when he finally discovers the source of all of this money, he's shocked! I was shocked! And I loved every minute of it! This is the great thrill of Harry Potter as well, is it not? Book after book of searching after and destroying horcruxes in an attempt to destroy evil Voldemort, and yet he continues to live! And so when in book 7, you suddenly realize the truth of the final horcrux, and what must be done to destroy it—the thrill of the 'real story behind the entire story' is so wonderfully satisfying!

I want to talk about our Gospel today, but only briefly, and only after first considering our Epistle. Our Epistle this morning, is a 'story behind the story' kind of passage. Israel, it would seem, has for so long associated the substance of its religion with the Law of Moses, that it has forgotten. It has forgotten a much older tradition. It has forgotten a deeper truth. It has forgotten that a few key things happened before Moses. To be fair, Moses is the most recited story in all of Scripture, right? God delivered his people from Egypt, he reconstitutes them as a nation instead of a slave-people. And to kick off its new found identity, he gives them the law.

Certainly ten commandments, but quite a few others as well. It is anything but a shocker that law-keeping becomes the most significant piece of being an Israelite.

But if law-keeping is but a line item within a much greater tradition, then an entire nation can get way off track. I risk a silly example here, but if car maintenance is my goal, and I decide to focus all of my efforts on carwashes instead of addressing the 'change oil' light on my dash, I will have the shiniest dysfunctional car in the parking lot. It will appear clean, but it will no longer function as a form of transportation. I will blow the engine.

It is for this reason that Paul writes about a tradition much older than Moses, who is much closer to v2.0 post-Egypt Israel. Israel existed for quite some time before Egypt! Israel existed before the Law. So what was the substance of Israel BEFORE the Law...and therefore would be the substance of Israel DURING the law...and therefore would be the substance of Christ's ministry and the Church? What's the story behind the story, here? How many stories are there? Or maybe there's just one story? Paul seems to think there is one story.

So let me quote him: "For the promise that he would inherit the world **did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith.** ³⁴If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void."

It's faith. We want to inherit the world. God promises to give us the inheritance of the world. God works in world-inheriting relationships with his people. So how to you become worthy of world-inheritance? How do you get ready for that one? He's really quite clear on this—it's NOT through faith-ignoring scrupulous adherence to the laws of Moses. It is, rather, by faith. God's essential, basic, underlying way of dealing with his people is on the basis of faith. Adam and Eve? Faith. Abraham? Faith. Moses??? Faith! Joshua, Samuel, Esther, Rahab? Faith. The Church? Faith. And it's the kind of faith you're thinking of. Paul even says that Abraham 'hoped against hope' that it would all work out! It actually feels like that. Abraham was working with the 'evidence' of things he couldn't see. Your life today is no different!

So what's the story behind the story of 2000 years of Jewish law-keeping? That it was to cultivate wellsprings of faith...all...along.

So now for the Gospel, which is so...very...Lenten. Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Jesus is messing with us in all the right ways. He, like Paul, mentions the 'inheriting of the whole world.' He knows you want it! He knows it's been promised to you. But there is a way of going about this in such a way that you will destroy your soul. That would NOT be the life of faith.

So how is this promise laid hold of? What is the substance of faith? How does this work? The self-justified are in a world of hurt, here, friends. And the God-justified shall be happy forevermore. Self-denial always precedes world-inheritance. That's the life of faith. If you merely seize what you think is rightfully yours by way of world-inheritance, you shall be sorely disappointed. If, however, you exercise by faith the life of the cross, then you will inherit a million blessings of untold delight in his glory. Jesus mentions glory. Glory! Jesus is not inviting you to a marketing convention with great swag in the world to come. He's not even inviting you to vacation down at the ol' chalet. He's inviting you to glory! You need a bigger category in the life of faith than free continental breakfast. He's willing to give you the whole world.

And it begins at this altar. Here is the life of faith in simplicity and purity. Come, take, eat. Lay hold of the promise of the Kingdom right here. You know who your sponsor and benefactor is—Christ. You know the story behind the story—faith. Take up your cross this morning by receiving its very fruits in this Holy Communion!

In the name...

~~Reminder~~ of Joel ~~✱~~

I. We have cross, and we have world-inheritance, you simply cannot make this stuff eq.

II. World-inheritance?

↳ Anita
apartment

III. Take up your cross - lulled to sleep. Sock example - boys

Will I nail my lazy physical flesh to the cross of indifference?