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Genesis 12:1-3
John 3:1-17

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IN ORDER THAT THE WORLD

A number of years ago, an animated film called “Flatland” came out.¹ It was billed as a mathematical fantasy that was a family-friendly adventure. I hope they didn’t pay the public relations firm that came up with that description a very big fee. Not surprisingly, the film was not a box-office smash. However, the film was based on a compelling concept that was developed in a novella late in the 19th century. If you draw a circle on your bulletin, it would have only two dimensions, height and length. The story’s idea was of a purely two dimensional universe consisting of characters who are literal squares, triangles, hexagons that is visited by a three dimensional being, a sphere. The characters who have height and length, but no depth, have great difficulty imagining someone that has a third dimension.

It was as if there was almost a whole new dimension to comprehend for Abram when he, at the age of seventy-five was called by God to leave his homeland to go to a land to be shown to him where he and his descendents would be made into a great nation. One little detail – he and his wife had not been able to have children. One further detail – the purpose of this blessing was not just that it would come to him and go no further. Rather, he was being blessed so that all the families of the earth would be blessed through him - blessed, in order to be a blessing. Even though it would be another twenty-five years before God’s blessing would show up in diapers, Abram moved on beyond where he had been in his physical location, moving even further in what he hoped and believed.

For Nicodemus, as told in our reading from the Gospel of John, it seems that Jesus presents a whole extra dimension for him to comprehend as well. As a religious leader of the Jewish people, he comes to the unconventional rabbi, probably curious to find out more about him. Nicodemus said he understood him to be a teacher from God because of the mighty works he was doing. Jesus then proceeds to teach, but the conversation between them flows as if a three-dimensional sphere was presenting himself to a two-dimensional square. Jesus is not just imparting information. He is inviting Nicodemus to go beyond his limited and limiting understanding. In doing so, Jesus uses a word with more than one meaning, when he tells the religious leader that no one can see God’s reign without being born ‘anothen.’ ‘Anothen’ is a Greek word from the original text that could mean either ‘from above’ or ‘anew.’ Nicodemus thinks Jesus is talking about being born anew, and responds with incredulity pointing out the physical impossibility of such things. Jesus responds, trying to start with where Nicodemus was, but still challenging him not to stay there. He, in essence, tells him that there is not only a physical birth, but that there also needs to be a spiritual birth. He proclaims that to more than just Nicodemus. For as we listen in on this conversation, Jesus moves from using ‘you’ in the singular to ‘you’ in the plural. It is obvious in the original language, but not in English. As a result, we who are looking over Nicodemus’ shoulder begin to get a glimpse that we too are being called to be open to the new dimension of what God is doing.

The responses from Nicodemus gradually drop away and we hear Jesus speaking to the broader audience of those reading the gospel account until we get to the most famous verse in the bible. Those who have focused just on that singular verse in the third chapter may still get a lot from it, but it is more than just a two-dimensional sign displayed at a sporting event or on a billboard saying John 3:16. It truly is a rich expression of where God’s expansive and expensive love leads. When we hear that verse as a part of Nicodemus’ larger narrative, we can begin to understand that Jesus is calling all of us to go beyond a limited and limiting understanding.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Do we understand the gift of eternal life as a blessing? Well, that’s rather obvious, Kirby. But do we understand it to be a blessing that comes to believers and goes no further or can it be a future blessing that impacts us now? And are we being blessed in order to be a blessing to others? These questions can lead us to go beyond where we have been, to experience another dimension of the blessings of eternal life.

“The Trip to Bountiful,” is a wondrous story that has been told on stage and on screen. It recently showed in movie form on the Lifetime Channel of all places. Based on a play by Horton Foote, it begins in a 1947 small Houston home where an older woman, Carrie Watts, has been living with her son and his wife for twenty years. She had moved away from the small town in which she had grown up and gotten married and raised her son, and she wanted to go back there before she dies. The relations between Carrie, her son, and especially the daughter-in-law are strained, and so, the audience wonders whether the town of Bountiful could really live up to its name. As we find out some things about Carrie, it wouldn’t be surprising for there to be no place like an imaginary home. Yet, even though the town turns out to be different than it had been in the past, the trip there transforms more than just the main character. ²

Some consider John 3:16 as a ticket to a trip home that will begin at the end of life. But there is an unconventional rabbi who can lead us to a whole new dimension when we begin to understand that we are not simply going to take a pie in the sky, by and by trip to eternal life, but that eternal life has taken a trip to come to us. It is the Bountiful One’s trip to us and our Lord doesn’t want us to wait until life’s end to experience it. God so loved the world that the transforming power of that love was not delayed until the afterworld. Even more, it is a blessing given in order to be a blessing to others.

Even though this blessing comes to us, it calls us to a new kind of journey that is rooted not just in God’s love for you and for me, but in God’s generous love for all of the world. That verse that comes after John 3:16 says, “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.” That divine love opens the way to eternal living now. It impacts how we are to respond to what is going on in Crimea and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and to what isn’t going on in relationship with our co-workers down the hall or our neighbors down the street. Divine love and eternal living redefine what is important now. We may be focused only on two-dimensional living, stuck just in height and length. But the world God created is not just round; it is a sphere. There is One who wants us to experience the depth of a whole new dimension. The Bountiful One’s trip to us has opened a whole new way and why of living. We don’t have to stay in Flatland. Amen.

¹ “Flatland,” Directed by Ladd Ehlinger, Jr., 2007, based on the book by Edwin A. Abbott, Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions, 1884.

² The Trip to Bountiful by Horton Foote, 1953.