

SPLIT INFINITY

A Reflection for the Second Sunday of Lent, 2008

Texts:

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ... Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. (Gen 12:1-8)

Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. 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, as 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. (Romans 4:1-5, 13-17)

Nicodemus said to Jesus, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? ... The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." ... "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." (John 3:1-17)

I observed my 60th birthday yesterday. I got cards.

From Germaine it was a photo of a golden retriever on the cover, with four tennis balls in its mouth. The sentiment inside was something about old dogs still able to learn new tricks.

The card from Germaine's sister and family had the numbers '60' in large, groovy print outside. When you opened the card one of those miniature built-in music boxes started blasting the tune, "Let the sunshine in," (from the sixties musical, HAIR) challenging me -- as the message read -- to try to remember the days of peace, love and special brownies ...

Our friends Andre and Tiffany gave me a card. On the cover was a sketch of something akin to Old Testament stone tablets, with the inscription, "You don't look a day over 600." Inside it read, "Go forth and celebrate." So I did.

Sixty years. It's hard to believe. Harder, at least, than believing a lot of other things. For instance, I believe for every drop of rain that falls ... (fill in the blank). I believe that somewhere in the dark of night ... (fill in the blank).

But I also believe a few other things:

I believe faith casts out fear.

I believe love is stronger than hate, and that violence in response to violence only begets more endless violence.

I believe forgiveness is divine; and that there's also a little bit of the divine in every human being, no matter how much evil and simple brutishness there seems to be, as well.

I believe in second chances, which some of us call Grace. We don't call it luck, or even providence; rather, it's a free gift, undeserved, which is even better.

So I also believe it's possible to be born again; sometimes, as in my case, again and again. I've been as good as dead more than once in my 60 years -- so far -- and been raised again to new life. I figure it's a prelude; and the best argument I've found for believing in something called the resurrection of the dead.

But -- I can't believe I'm 60!

When I look in the mirror -- really look -- I see gray hair, a well-worn face, and an older version of myself. More startling, I see my father. More startling still, I see my grandfather! I am the heir to an inheritance of "relative longevity." Six decades, and counting.

I take a deep breath to soften the blow of having grown old-er.

I take a deep breath, rising momentarily in stature; as if to throw off some years that have piled on. But the muscles in my legs still feel stiff and sore from two days of hard skiing last week. I realize now that each time I hit the slopes, my residual endurance seems a little less than the year before. The "downhill" takes on a double-meaning, as in going *down hill*; as I gratefully allow simple gravity to do more and more of the work.

I remember turning fifty. Barely. I remember the unwelcome greeting card from a former spouse, adding insult to injury. At least that's what I thought at the time, before the generous Giver of all good gifts placed Germaine in my life.

I remember the first mail solicitation from AARP arriving, thinking they had the wrong address.

I remember it as a time I first started hearing other boomers try to reassure each other with such jingoos "Well, fifty is the new forty, you know?"

But if sixty is the new fifty I still have to admit I can no longer consider myself middle-aged. It's tough to make any kind of a reasonable argument I'll live to 120. Or want to.

I don't plan on living forever; which I figure is probably a good thing, so as not to be too disappointed when it doesn't happen. And I don't particularly know at which age I would choose to return and set back the clock; though I'd certainly do a few things differently if I had the hindsight that primarily seems to come from mistakes once made, their impact felt, endured, absorbed and chalked up to something we call experience.

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Besides, how can one go back? In what way could someone possibly go all the way back and be born again? "How can anyone be born after having grown old?"

The long, long biblical tradition, beginning with Genesis & the story of Abram & Sarai, the Lord God Yahweh gives the simple command, "Go" and (essentially) leave everything you know. Yahweh cajoles them with the assurance, "I will show you .." and. "I will bless you." And, the writer tells us, Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from home.

Centuries upon centuries later, Paul writes to the early Christian church in Rome, recalling the story of Abraham from the Jewish scriptures. He wants us to understand and believe it is not adherence to all the rules (the Law) by which we save ourselves, but the gift of faith given us to believe and act accordingly that gets us right with God, ourselves and each other (i.e. makes us "righteous").

"Abraham believed God," he says, "and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." "... it (all) 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."

Between the ancient text in Genesis and Paul letter to the early Christian believers, there was the itinerant rabbi/preacher with no formal education and only a band of scruffy followers from the backwater village of Nazareth, named Jesus.

Jesus was regarded as a spiritual misfit, a borderline heretic, an religious outcast who broke the rules with the audacity of a prophet, and then some. He'd heal on the Sabbath, he'd touch the unclean and consort with them, he'd usurp the Lord God's place and pronounce the forgiveness of sins; as if forgiveness and healing and new life were the same thing; and you really can't have one without the other.

Despite his low standing among the religious authorities, there must have been something mesmerizing about him to lure at least one prominent member of the clergy, a Pharisee, a "teacher of Israel" named Nicodemus, who snuck out one night – snuck out of the safety and sanctity of propriety – to find out about this Jesus.

"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God," he whispers in the dark. "For no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

Jesus perceives the inherent question in the statement. The question Nicodemus wants to ask is, How'd he do it? How had Jesus managed to pull off the stunts he'd done; especially despite his audacious flaunting of all the rules, the Law, the Code, all the infractions?

Jesus moves the conversation along and carries it to the next level. It's all about the Spirit, he says. It's the wind of the Spirit, that you can't control or predict; but when you allow yourself to get caught up in it, it'll sweep you up and take you along to another place, a fresh start, a place where you'd feel as if you'd been born again.

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John the evangelist attributes the well-known lines to Jesus, "For God so loved the world that he gave his son ..." But the rabbi Jesus – who had no messianic identity of himself – would have concurred with the rest of it.

About God's love for us, and longing heartache that we not perish.

About our believing in God as the only thing needed (like old Abraham) to be counted among the righteous. And whether you're as old as 60 (like me), or 75 like Abram, or 600 like my friends apparently think I am ...

It's about how God's love for us is eternal and infinite. Eternal, as in *forever*. And infinite, as in *without end*. And the road from here to eternity is a winding, windy road. Windy, as in Spirit, where there are a few simple rules, and all them are based on love, charity, forgiveness, reconciliation, amendment of life, grace and a second chance to be born again.

In grammatical circles, there is something called an *infinitive*, and an unending debate over the correct rule to apply to something called the *split infinitive*.

A split infinitive consists of the function word "to," followed by an adverb (usually an *-ly* adverb), followed by an infinitive; as in *to gracefully age*.

On the other hand, in a circle of believers, listening to a gospel story like the one about Jesus of Nazareth and a befuddled religious leader who's feet are too stuck in the sod to feel the wind blowing in his face, there is something I call *split infinity*.

In a circle of believers, listening to a gospel story ... about Jesus of Nazareth and a befuddled religious leader who's feet are too stuck in the sod to feel the wind blowing in his face, there is something I call "split infinity."

We're born, we age, we grow older, then older still; and all the while we're raised up again and again by the power of God's spirit, and reborn – even to the point of (as we were reminded on Ash Wednesday) "dying, yet we live." Now and forever: Split Infinity!

So here we are, together tonight, wherever we are in our separate times and places and stages in our lives.

Nonetheless, we are all born of the Spirit. Make no mistake, it is the wind of the Spirit that has led you here tonight. And rather than face the rather limited prospects of growing old and simply coming to the end of the road, we have come to know and believe, by faith, we are forever born anew and eternally, in God.

Amen.