

Abram & Nicodemus and us

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Lent 2A – Genesis 12 1-4a, John 3 1-17

Has God ever challenged you to really lift your game? I don't mean something simple and one-off, like being tempted to do something selfish, but feeling moved to decide against it because you're a Christian. No. I mean a really big challenge; a challenge to change the way you live completely. Has God challenged you to make a career choice that doesn't necessarily pay as well as the alternatives, but you choose it because you know God wants you to make a difference for other people? Would you change the place you live, leave everyone behind, risk their bad opinion because God has asked this of you? These are frightening questions.

Today we've met two faithful people who heard this big, life-changing challenge, and they said yes; their names are Abram and Nicodemus. Today we've been eavesdroppers, listening in as each of them met God in a life-changing encounter. God challenged Abram to leave behind family and home and go to a place God would show him. And Jesus challenged Nicodemus, a religious VIP, to drop all his current ideas about how to serve God best and instead to be born again from above.

Both of them are told God's purpose for this great change. Abram is told of God's intention to bless him, and through him, to bless all families of the earth. And Nicodemus is first to hear the best known saying in the whole Bible—*God loved the world in this way: he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life*. So both of them are challenged to be part of something that changes the world.

These two stories have tremendous significance for us. Their greatest message is what they say about God. They tell us the

reason for all God's calls and challenges to us; it's God's love for the world. No qualifications, hesitations, exceptions or prior demands – God loves the world. Another enormously significant message in these stories: they show us that people choose to respond to this love by hearing it as a call to action, and then rising to the challenge. And when we do, the world is changed, because a new way has opened for the world to learn of God's love; a new way has opened for the world to experience God's love.

How to respond to these stories? We hear three messages in them. And each message demands a response. The first message is that God loves the world unconditionally. God doesn't first tell the world to believe or be good or anything before God will love us. No; God loves us first. God is like any good parent. Good parents don't expect their babies to give them signs of love before they'll love them back.

Parents love their children before their babies even know them – a bit like the way God loved you and me even back in Abram's time. And if we are to respond to this, it's because we see that this is what God is like, and like children do, grow to love just like that; to love the world like God does. Which is good because the second message our stories tell us is that God wants the whole world to experience that love. Again, just like any good parent, God wants the kids to grow up knowing that they are loved and loveable. Kids learn that by being loved; by experiencing love and care. It's a tragedy if anyone grows up feeling unloved and worthless.

But experiencing love isn't an automatic thing for kids or anyone. It only happens when people give it to them. And therein lies the third message of these stories. God sends people into the world to give people the blessing of God's love. We saw Abram sent out, and we know Jesus as the one sent to us from God. And even Nicodemus would join in. They all willingly left behind what was familiar and safe, and set out – God alone knew where – to bring people to experience God's

love.

The conversation we overheard between Jesus and Nicodemus was God's new call to Nicodemus to do what Abram and Jesus did. This deeply pious man who visited Jesus under cover of darkness would one day heed the call to become like Jesus – to go out in broad daylight and risk everything he had always stood for to bring others to a knowledge of God's love; to give others a taste of God's love for them.

The move from shadow to broad daylight – from blindness to sight – is only part of the journey of discipleship. Discipleship is about more than just personal change in the disciple. It sets us free from all that.

Choosing to be Christ's disciple sets us free from having to find meaning and purpose in our lives just in how we look, or how clever we are, or what we can do, or how impressive our friends are. Imagine leaving all that clobber behind. One day, you wake up from a bad dream, open your eyes and know that you're loved just for who you are. If, in that moment, you saw someone else crying out in their sleep – needlessly suffering, you'd want to wake them up and tell them they're okay. You're fine; God loves you. We've discovered God's unexpected, unearned love for us, and we know it's there for you too!

So now it's clear. God sent others; we're next. We're called to lift our game and do what we can to make sure God's beloved know that that's who they are: Wake up; it's okay; God adores you. Amen