

# Love by direct action

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Lent 2A – Gen 12 1-4a, Ps 121, Rom 4 1-5, 13-17, John 3 1-17

What does a preacher do when confronted with two of the most important passages of scripture in the Bible? They are the call of Abraham, Gen 12 1-4a, and John 3.16-17 – the verses we normally remember starting with '*God so loved the world...*'.

I'd better start by saying what's so important about them for us and for everyone.

In short, without these six verses, we certainly wouldn't be here today. If Abram hadn't been called, and if God hadn't given his only-begotten Son, there'd be no Judaism, Christianity or Islam today. We wouldn't know that God loves the Earth and loves all the people and creatures who live on it. So they're very significant words. They record the amazing, courageous sacrifices that got us all here – sacrifices on Abram's part, and on Jesus' part. So first to Abram (later renamed Abraham).

When God told Abram to leave his country, kindred and ancestral identity, and go to the land God would show him, I feel that obeying that call put Abram in a similar position to those poor, uninsured people of the recent floods: taking only what can be salvaged, and setting out on a new life with no idea of where it will lead. Except Abram did it by choice. In the face of extraordinary risk, Abram answered God's call; Abram believed God's promise.

The promise – God promised Abram, a childless seventy-five-year-old, that he would become the ancestor of a great nation. And as well as being blessed himself, all the families of the Earth would be blessed through him. Would we have gone? Abram had to be prepared to trust God and set out – who knew where!

And the last half verse tells us that he did. He believed what God told him, he set out, and the rest is history.

There's very little detail in this story. We don't know how Abram learned to hear God. He had no Bible, no Jewish Law to guide him, no tradition of belonging to God's Chosen People, and he'd never seen the Promised Land, whatever that was. No wonder Paul was so moved by Abram's faith. In Rom. 4.5, (*But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness*), Paul sums up what Abram believed. If I may paraphrase Paul's words, *Abram, who'd done nothing we know of to earn God's trust, believed that God trusted him. And Abram trusted that God would make him and his, as yet, non-existent descendants God's means of blessing everyone else on Earth, regardless of whether they knew God or not.* Abram believed all that!

But why would God want to do all that? These verses give us much more than just the origin story of the three Abrahamic faiths. They tell us that God loves the Earth and every living thing; that God's motive for calling Abraham – for engaging with us at all – is Love for us and for all the Earth.

If you ever wanted evidence of genuine continuity between the Old and New Testaments, here it is. God's unearned love for everyone; God's grace. Pure Gospel!

Which brings us to those wonderful verses from today's Gospel – John 3.16-17. What's so important about them?

First of all, let's hear them in a more accurate translation.

<sup>16</sup> ... God loved the world **in this way**\*: He gave His One and Only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send His Son into the world that He might condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.

(\*Many versions make the mistake of translating the Greek here as an adverb of degree – ‘how much’ – rather than manner – ‘how’. In the 200+ other times this word occurs in the New Testament, it is an adverb of manner – how, in this way, thus. So the HCSB version quoted here gives it that form in English.)

That’s how God loves the world: by direct action: by giving Jesus. And Jesus is sent into the world *not* to judge, but to save! We need to hear that loud and clear. The only judgement this part of John’s Gospel describes is the loss involved for any people who choose not to accept this love. Judgement is by our choice, not God’s. And as far as needing salvation is concerned, a flip through the daily newspaper should make it clear how desperate is our plight.

So these verses record the fact of another son leaving everything to go out and bring God’s blessing to all families of Earth. That’s the connection between these two stories: sacrifice of the deepest intimacy – the sacrifice of voluntary separation – for the sake of strangers. I can only vaguely imagine what it cost Abram to set out on *his* journey. I can’t imagine what it cost Jesus. If the love of God is the source of all the love there is between all living creatures and their young – us included – what could possibly describe the cost Jesus bore to choose his journey to the Cross?

So these are some of the most important scriptures in the Bible. Love is their message; God reaching out to the whole world in love to bless, to save – us. And that love is a verb; real love is an action, not just a feeling. Direct action.

Everyone is a bottomless pit when it comes to needing love. We have this message to share, and it’s a message of limitless love – enough and more to fill any number of bottomless pits. God’s love can be experienced by acts of justice, compassion, solidarity, sacrifice, risk-taking for others.

And now it's our turn bring that message to the world – by direct action, like God does. Amen