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Lent II  
16 March 2014  
Grace-Trinity Lutheran Churches, Wichita  
Gen 12.1-9; Rom 4.1-8, 13-17; Jn 3.1-17

*“The promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world  
did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.  
For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs,  
faith is null and the promise is void.”* (Rom 4:13-4)

*In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit*

Our Old Testament reading for today seems pretty uneventful.  
Nothing really *happens*—it’s just some movement.  
There’s no wall of water or burning bush or flying seraphim.  
There’s no fire and brimstone preaching or the sweet and comforting words of the prophets.  
All we have today is, “*So Abram went...*” (Gen 12:4)

This is a bit of a letdown to those of us who like to make heroes out of people.  
We want something a bit more dazzling, more eye-grabbing and exciting.  
We want Abram to do something spectacular,  
to make some big pronouncement, show evidence of a conversion—give us something!  
And we don’t just want this so that we could be entertained—we want it for his sake,  
so that he’d have something to show for it.  
We want something that might explain *why* God chose him.

Have you ever thought about it?  
Why Abram?  
What’s so special about him?  
What did God see in him?

And then turn it on yourselves: why you?  
Why’d He send His Spirit to you and not someone else?  
What’d you do to attract Him?  
What’d He see? – great potential? a future? what is it?

These are the questions we ask—either of ourselves or of others.  
And we think the only thing that’ll make sense and gives us answers to these is the Law.

It tells us that *if* we think this and say that and do the following, *then* we get something in return.  
The Law gives us a formula;  
and in its most simple form, it’s: if I..., then God...  
If we plug in enough of the right numbers on our end, then we’ll surely get something from God.  
In that way, everything makes sense.

So, according to the Law, Abram must’ve *done* something.  
It might’ve been something he thought or decided about how his life would go.  
It might’ve been that he said just the right thing.  
Or it might’ve been his life, that that he lived well and was good to others.

But whatever it might've been—it must've been something.  
That's the way of the Law.

But that's not how the text goes.  
We know absolutely nothing about Abram.  
Our reading simply begins:

“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. And 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.’” (Gen 12:1-2)

The Law can't make sense of this.  
The formula breaks down.  
Abram is promised all these things, and he hasn't even done anything to deserve it.

It seems arbitrary at best, but at worst, unfair and not right!  
The Law, in this case, just makes us mad.  
It can't give us an answer for why him and not someone else.  
And neither can the Law do so for you.

The Law gives no answer to the question: *why some and not others*.  
According to the Law, no one qualifies.  
There haven't been enough *ifs* to give a *then* for salvation.  
The Law is silent here.  
And it must be.

The Law only goes so far.  
But then another voice pops up.  
The voice of grace, the Gospel!

While the Law points to you and asks whether you've filled in the “ifs” well enough or not,  
the Gospel points to Jesus—and everything is enough already!

That's what Nicodemus found out today.  
He found that the wind blows where it pleases.  
The Spirit alone is what makes alive, and He does it through His Word.  
Nicodemus, you must be born again.

The Law you keep trying—the *if's* and *then's*, the formulas and equations—it doesn't work.  
If anything, it lets you know you haven't deserved any of it!

But the Gospel creates a new life, a new beginning, a new birth.  
Just as you did nothing to *get born* the first time, neither can you the second.  
It comes by water and the Spirit—Holy Baptism.

There in the waters it is God who works, not you.

There His word goes forth and makes the grandest promises you could ever imagine.  
 He promises life, even though you die.  
 Hope, when everything seems cause for despair.  
 Forgiveness, for all the Law you've failed to keep.

It's all there in Baptism.  
 And it's got nothing to do with you—at least, not with anything you've said, thought, or done.  
 That would be the Law.  
 Under the Gospel, it has everything to do with who God is.

And John tells us that this God is the God who loves.  
 He loves the world in such a way that He lifts up His Son—His only begotten Son—onto a cross  
 (just like the serpent in the wilderness);  
 and whoever looks and believes in Him has eternal life.

It's really quite simple and basic—it's all about faith.  
 But faith doesn't fit into the *if / then* formula—even though we really want it to.  
 We really like saying there's nothing you can do to be saved, but believe.  
 And right there we end up turning faith into our work, into part of the Law—  
 a really minor part, but a part nonetheless—  
 and then faith is destroyed.  
 It's no longer gift if I've got to do it.

That's why the Father lifts His Son on the cross.  
 So that everyone could see.  
 And the Son lifted on the cross creates the faith that clings to Jesus.  
 For when your eyes are fixed on Jesus,  
 they can't be fixed on you.

And that's what God wants.  
 He wants to be the God of grace and mercy, the God who loves and makes great promises.  
 He wants the credit for your salvation—and He does it all through Christ and Him crucified.

When we get that it's all about faith—  
 about having our eyes fixed on Christ, on His promises, on His Word—  
 then our Old Testament reading makes a bit more sense.

It really is quite simple.  
 God promised Abram that he'd be a great nation, a blessing to all.  
*Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.*  
*So Abram went...*

And so do we.  
 Faith simply clings to Jesus; it follows where He leads; it unites us to Christ.  
 Fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith.

*In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit*