

“What Really Matters”

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Apostles Anglican Church

Scriptures: Genesis 12:1–9; Psalm 33:12–21; Romans 4:1–17; John 3:1–16

What is of primary importance?

That seems to be a simple question on its face, but how often have you been distracted away from something central by something peripheral?

I can't think of a better example of this than doing chores around the house. I have lost track of the task I was going to do so many times by following some lesser, side task that reveals itself along the way.

But any story I could tell is nowhere near as good as the scene from the sitcom *Malcolm in the Middle*, where the father, played by Bryan Cranston, attempts to change a light bulb in the family dining room. After he turns the switch to determine which light he has to replace, he goes to the closet to pick up a light bulb out of the box on the shelf. But then he discovers that the shelf is wobbly due to a missing screw. So he heads to the junk drawer for a screwdriver. In getting out the screwdriver, he discovers a squeak in the drawer, which sends him to the garage for a can of WD-40. If you are following along you will probably guess correctly that the can is empty, which sends him to his car to go out and get some more. And of course when he starts the engine, his car is making a concerning noise. So when his wife comes into the garage to ask if the lightbulb has been replaced, he comes out from

under the open hooded- car, covered in grease and yells, “what does it look like I’m doing?”

It is so easy to be distracted from the main thing. One of the reasons for this is that we live in a world that constantly presents to us competing visions of what is most important. Just this week, we had the State of the Union address. And now I will begin my full, point by point commentary on the Presidential address of Congress...

All right everyone can relax, I am not going to do that. But I do bring up the State of the Union for a purpose because what happened on Tuesday night and what has happened at every State of the Union for decades now is that the President gets up and presents a vision for the country, and this vision puts forward certain ideas and values as being of prime importance. It is a pitch to the citizens of the United States to buy into that vision. In the years since cable news came on the scene, this event has also included a representative of the opposition party who presents an alternative view of what is important and valuable, and this person makes the case that we all should buy into their vision of things. It’s a giant exercise in getting our attention and framing the story we are telling ourselves about what truly matters.

But politics is not the only area of our lives where we are bombarded competing visions for what is of greatest importance. Achieve this professional goal. Get to this level of financial stability. Achieve this level of mental awareness. Then your life will be complete.

But all of these are empty cans of WD-40 while the dining room table stays without light.

For us, for the people of God, people who have been baptized into Christ's body, our central story has been set since the beginning of time.

Consider the story of Abraham's call we heard this morning from Genesis 12. This is the beginning of God's specific relationship with his people Israel, the relationship that would culminate in the coming of Jesus.

But first, a brief review of Genesis up to this point: things begin well, God's creation is good. The human beings he makes in his image are, in his words, *very good*. But then, things go off the rails a bit. The people God has made break his commandments; they even kill one another. Then, a fresh start with a faithful family and a boatload of animals in an ark. But the descendants of that faithful family get too big for their britches and think they can build a tower that will mean they are better than God. It seems like the experiment has failed. But then in Genesis 12, we see that God hasn't given up.

"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. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

God's plan to fix the world, to heal the world of sin and death, it is not a political platform. It is not an amassing of resources. It is to draw closely in relationship to a family. The core of God's plan to fix the world is relational. Our need to be in

communion with him is the primary need that we have, and as the call to Abraham reveals, is the key to the blessing of the entire world. "In you," God tells Abraham, all the families of the earth shall be blessed." "I am going to draw near to you and in doing so I am going to make the way for all people to draw near to me."

I don't think we should gloss over this morning the fact that God's promise to Abraham doesn't necessarily answer all the practical questions he might have right away. God sends his chosen people out on a journey without booking them an Air BNB. "Leave your land and go to a land I will show you," brings up a host of questions, such as where? Are there people there already? Will they let me stay? Is it a good land to grow crops and keep livestock? These weren't small practical concerns, but questions of life and death for Abraham and his family.

And yet, notice that Abraham obeys before he gets the answers to the questions. God would provide for Abraham's needs. He would give the land of Canaan to his descendants, and makes that promise in verse 7. Speaking of Abraham's descendants, at this point, there were none to be found. The text has already told us that Sarah was barren in chapter 11. And so Abraham leaves on the journey with simply the promise that there will be descendants and that they will have a place to live. His obedience comes first, because he recognizes that it is indeed the One True God who has drawn near to him.

The other voices that present to us concerns and areas of focus may have a point. Especially on a day like today, when the balance of peace in the world feels particularly fragile, we need not downplay the practical questions of life. How will I meet my needs? Will there be a peaceful world for those who come after me?

Abraham's faith didn't mean he didn't have any questions, it did mean that he obeyed in the midst of his questions.

Building from the foundation of that faith, Abraham's descendants did indeed become a people who walked and wrestled with God. But distractions came and the relational core of their connection to the divine came under threat. In some cases, this was through false deities, false worship, and idolatry. And in some cases, the competing narrative was a little more subtle.

Some among God's people took God's good Law, intended to set the boundaries of what it means to be in God's family, to be in right relationship with God, and made the observance of the Law the central tenet of the faith. The terms and duties of the relationship replacing the relationship itself. Things got so bad that, as Jesus points out himself (Matthew 23:23), that a hyperfocus on some aspects of the law (the tithing of spices) helped to cover up how major parts of the law were not being upheld (taking care of parents). A certain version of getting it right had become the thing everyone was chasing, but none of it was actually getting them closer to the God of Abraham, the God who had given the Law.

But not everyone was so far gone, not even those among the religious authorities. Nicodemus shows us this when he comes to Jesus. It's a brilliant detail that John chooses to include that Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. As an aside - I always remember that detail because of the children's musical I was in in about 1997 - Nic at Nite - shout out to 90s kid church musicals. But it is a brilliant detail because it shows us how Nicodemus is fearful of being seen, thereby setting the nervous tone of his approach - he's intrigued by this Jesus, but he is too scared to express this

interest in a way that might upset his peers. Nicodemus appears to have grown in courage over the course of the Gospel story though, because he is a voice of restraint at an attempted arrest of Jesus in John 7 and he also provided spices for Jesus' burial (John 19:39). But he starts, like many of us, more fearful. That is one of the ways the darkness of his arrival properly sets the scene.

But we should also consider the role of light and darkness more broadly in John's Gospel.¹ John chapter 1, this great poetic reflection on the incarnation, has light all over it: "the light has shone in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. In John 8, Jesus says that he is the light of the world. And in John 9, Jesus brings light to the eyes of a man whose eyes had been dark since birth. When Nicodemus comes in darkness to see Jesus and hear the words that he has to say, that darkness is not just referring to the current position of the earth relative to the sun. Nicodemus comes in the darkness of a world that had forgotten how to walk in relationship with its Creator.

But all is not lost with Nicodemus. Some of Abraham's blood still flows through his veins. He sees that Jesus is the real thing. He comes in faith. Nicodemus is remembered for his incredulity at the idea of being born again, but remember that his first line is a pretty good one. "Rabbi, we *know* that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him."² Nicodemus may have come in darkness, but he is beginning to see the light.

¹ See Stroup, George. *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Lent 2, Gospel reading.*

² John 3:2 emphasis mine.

It is no wonder that Nicodemus is confused by this notion of being born again, born by water and the Spirit. He has forgotten that the family of God is something you are born into, not something you earn your way into. Through all of his law keeping and obsessing, the idea that one can be born into God's favor is a foreign idea to him, even though that's exactly how Abraham got in. It wasn't the law-keeping of circumcision that was credited to Abraham as righteousness, Paul reminds the Romans, it was the faith that drew him near to God.

Families that you earn your way into are no families at all. You're thinking of the mafia. Families that are based on merit come with a love that is conditional, that runs out when the relationship ceases being profitable, when the so-called "family" is done with you.

And so what's on offer for Nicodemus is not an abandoning of obedience to God's Law, Jesus himself says he comes to do no such thing. It is an invitation to be born into a family that looks through the good Law of the Lord to the Good Lord himself. That's the point of the Law, of true religion, of Creation itself.

And so in unsure times and in comfortable times, remember what life is truly about. Remember the call of the God who called Abraham and how his desire is to have that same sort of relationship with you and every single one of the billions of people on this planet. Don't let the news drive your focus off of this main thing. All the rest is sometimes important and sometimes not, but it is always secondary at best.

And also in this season of Lent, remember that the aim of your disciplines is not to earn you God's favor, it is to bring you closer to him. Your disciplines are doing their

work when they help you drown out the noise of everyday life and its demands from all sides, and bring you to that still small voice that came to Abraham and told him it was time to relocate.

I pray that we who have the imperfect curiosity of Nicodemus may also have the readiness of Abraham to pack up and follow after wherever the Lord leads. In a world of distraction, let us be a people of singular focus, focused on the God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.