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Genesis 12: 1 – 4a
Romans 4: 1 – 5, 13 – 17

Psalm 121
John 3: 1 – 17

Two hundred generations, or about 4,000 years, ago, a nomadic family leaves their home in Ur of the Chaldeans, a village or settlement probably on the banks of the Euphrates River in what is now southeastern Iraq. Terah, the head of the family, intends to head to the land of Canaan, present day Israel, about 600 miles, mostly due west. Instead, though, they follow the Euphrates River northwest and reached Haran, a city on what is now the Turkish-Syrian border. There, Terah decides to settle down.

Terah lives to a very ripe old age in Haran, surrounded by his extended family, but after he dies, the word of the Lord comes to Terah's son, Abram. God calls Abram (he's not yet Abraham) on a journey. "Leave your home," God says to Abram, "leave your family and friends. Leave what you have known for these many years and go where I will lead you." Why would Abram want to do that? Because God promises to bless Abram with an incredible legacy, not just of a few children and grands, but a legacy of a whole nation, a whole people. God will bless Abram richly, but through Abram, God will also bless the entire world, the nation who will be Abram's legacy, and everyone else, too. Through Abram, the whole world will be brought into relationship with God.

God is calling Abram from, as one writer [D. Clendinen, *Journey with Jesus*, 2014] puts it, "present clarity into a future of profound ignorance." God is calling Abram from the known to the unknown, from what he has to what he does *not* have, from the safe and secure to the vulnerable and unpredictable. In the midst of total uncertainty about his future, Abram steps out in faith, in trust in this voice of God, and says yes. With Sarai (later to be Sarah) his wife, and Lot, his nephew, and all their possessions and all their slave entourage, they set off.

Abram, at the age of 75, chooses to relinquish control of his life and allow God to work through him. Abram, with God's guidance, migrates away from Haran, a city whose name means 'parched' in Hebrew, and away from a center of economic, political and military power for the ancient world, to go into the hinterlands, to wherever it is that God is leading him. His journey from Haran to Canaan (where they were headed in the first place years before), takes him from the Euphrates River basin south through central Syria and Jordan, all the way down to Egypt, because of a famine in Canaan, and then back up into south central Canaan, now Israel. Abram does all of this because of God's promise to bless him and to bless all the other peoples of the earth through him.

In John's Gospel, we also hear about God working through one person, in this case, Jesus, to bless the whole world. It begins with the familiar story of Nicodemus, the Pharisee, who comes to visit Jesus under the cloak of darkness at night. Nighttime and darkness in John's Gospel are symbolic of not knowing or not understanding. We don't know how long Nicodemus stays and whether it is dawn by the time he departs, but he must have his own dawning of understanding, because later, in John 7, Nicodemus will stand up in support of Jesus against his fellow Pharisees, and towards the end of John's Gospel, Nicodemus will help Joseph of Arimathea bury Jesus' body.

Then, there is a curious conclusion to the Nicodemus story. Because ancient Scripture was written without punctuation, it's not clear whether it is Jesus speaking or whether it is in a narrator's

voice. We don't even know if Nicodemus is still present to hear these words, but they are apparently an explanation for why Jesus is there.

“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. Indeed God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

That's John 3:16 – 17 as we just heard it from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translation. The first half of this, verse 16, is so very familiar that most of us can rattle it off pretty closely, but the second half, verse 17, not as much. We have seen 'John 3:16' on signs nailed to trees along country roads or held up at large sporting events so many times that we are somewhat inured to the words. (Isn't it interesting that no one ever holds up a sign for John 3:17?) Because these words are so familiar, they have lost some of their ability to get our attention. Now listen to it again in a different translation from the very same Greek by the Rev. Dr. Mark Davis [*Left Behind and Loving It* blog], an ordained Presbyterian minister:

“For in this way, God loved the world, that [God] gave the only-born Son, in order that anyone who believes in him would not be destroyed but have life eternal. For God did not send the son into the world in order that [God] might judge the world, but in order that the world might be made whole through him.”

There are some subtle yet significant differences in what this second translation conveys. Often, Davis notes, the Greek is translated that God SO loved the world, as in God loved the world SO much. However, the word translated as “so” from the Greek is not “so” in terms of how much, but rather in terms of how, that is, in a particular way, like the “Just So” stories. To say “for in this way, God loved the world...” doesn't imply that God loves the world any less, it just means that God expresses that love through the act of sending Jesus, through the act of deigning to come and pitch a tent among us.

Another of the subtle yet significant differences in the translation is the end of verse 17. We usually hear it, “...that the world might be saved through him,” whereas Davis translates it, “...that the world might be made whole through him.” Is ‘being saved’ the same as ‘being made whole?’ Absolutely. But I'm not sure that's what comes to mind when we hear the word ‘saved,’ especially in our neck of the woods. For a lot of folks, ‘being saved’ means saying that you ‘accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior’ and thereby save yourself (note the ‘self’) from going to hell, eternal damnation. That's a rather narrow, limited sense of salvation. To understand salvation as ‘being made whole’ includes so much more.

To be made whole is to be reconciled and to be healed of our brokenness from God, neighbor and self. To be made whole is to allow the wounds, not just in us, but in all of Creation to be healed, nurtured and loved. To be made whole is for all of life, all of Creation to be redeemed and to flourish. To be made whole is to love and to be loved. To be made whole is for each part of Creation to live into the purpose for which God has created it. To be made whole is to be in complete union with God, the very definition of being in the Kingdom of Heaven. Somehow, ‘being saved’ just doesn't seem to convey all of that.

In our reading from Genesis, God works through one person to bless the entire world, to be a light to the nations, drawing them, like moths to a flame, to God. Abram trusts God to work through him. But Abram's offspring don't live into that same trust, so God tries again, this time through God-with-us, Jesus. In this way, God enters into Creation, comes to us, loves us. Creation is a dynamic

process, continually unfolding from the mind of God, and God DOES love us so much that God invites us into that dynamic process of creation and re-creation. God invites us, just as God invites Abram, to be a blessing to the world, and in doing that, to help the world to become whole.

So, as we think about Creation Care this Lent, how might God be wanting to work through *us* to make the world, to make Creation, whole? Can we be like seeds in soil, willing to grow in the womblike darkness of the unknown, (a little like Nicodemus?) trusting God to call forth in us that which is not yet seen? Can we allow the wind, the breath, the Spirit of God, to blow as it will, taking us to places we cannot imagine? Can we be like rocks in a stream, allowing the waters of Baptism to constantly wash over us, transforming us, shaping us? Can we abandon ourselves to the care and direction of God like Abram, like Jesus, so that we can be lights to the world, so that we can be instruments or vehicles through which God can bless everyone? What will you – what will I – do this Lent to let this be so? What will you and I NOT do this Lent to let this be so?

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