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## Guided by the Promise

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Renewed in Mercy

**SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR A**

This Sunday, the gospel reading from John 3 is one that many people know by heart. Its familiarity is a comfort, yet we must not let comfort become complacency.

### REFERENCES

Genesis 12:1-4

Psalms 121

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

John 3:1-17

### COLORS

Purple

What then are we to say about Abraham? That's probably not a question many preachers have wrestled with in the run-up to the sermon presentation. After all, if we didn't know what to say about Abraham, then we probably wouldn't say much of anything. We'd skip over to the gospel, a much more familiar text and one we have probably preached many times. Within that text is perhaps the most famous verse in the whole New Testament, if not the whole Bible. So, why should we have anything to say about Abraham? Because Nicodemus was asking about him.

Was he? No, surely not. There's no reference to Abraham in this conversation, is there? Well, we don't know what Nicodemus came to talk about because Jesus hijacked the dialogue before Nicodemus had a chance to say more than a few words. We don't know what was on the cheat sheet that Nicodemus had tucked into his sleeve that night. We don't know the burning questions that brought the member of the Sanhedrin out in the dark of night to approach the surprisingly popular prophet from rural nowhere-ville. We don't know because Jesus set the agenda.

Nicodemus comes in schmoozing, as one does. He was trying to butter Jesus up, catch him off guard, drop his defenses—at least that is what it seems like. But Jesus jumps in with answers to questions that weren't asked. And Nicodemus is on his heels from that moment on. Does he not understand, or is he joking? Is he lost in the rhetoric or just confused by the approach? We can't know, and it might not be the most fruitful approach to try to discern what was going on in Nicodemus's mind in the dark of that night.

Instead, let's look at Jesus—always the better approach. Jesus offers a gift. I know it sounds like Jesus gets frustrated with Nicodemus. (Are you a teacher but you don't understand?) It sounds like a reprimand, and maybe it is. Maybe Jesus expects more from those who would be leaders of the people. Maybe Jesus wants a teacher to have some wisdom to share. However, even if there is a reprimand or disappointment, the gift is still offered. It is through the uncertainty of the questioner that we get the promise of hope and transformation. We get the most famous verse in the entire Bible: "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" (John 3:16). Scrawl it on cardboard and hold it up in the endzone. Wave it in the streets. Tattoo it in a prominent place. It is the essence of the gift, of the promise, of the gospel. God so loved.

But don't make believing a work. That's the struggle here. That's what couldn't get through the thick skull of the teacher who wanted to crawl into a womb and be born a second time. He wanted to order the Spirit. He wanted the formula for new life. He wanted the work that could be done. Jesus says, "I've done the work. You are now Abraham on the threshold of a new life."

He could have said that. Instead, Paul tells us what we can say about Abraham. It's the same argument: law and gospel, faith and works. We want to work our way into the kingdom; we want to earn our space in the kin-dom. Again and again, we have to be told that we're misunderstanding something significant. Abraham says Paul is the prime example of what it means to believe. It's not work, not an effort on his part. It's not something that is rewarded by pats on the head like an obedient hound. No, it is an orientation. It is a way of seeing the world. "Go," Abraham heard, "Go to a land that I will show you." Remember that? He did not hear, "Here's your destination; I've made all the reservations and gassed up the car." No, he was to go to someplace that would be revealed at some point. He was just told to go. And – this is the amazing part – he went.

In that going, Abraham became the ancestor of all of us. It is no longer the flesh that defines him or us, for that matter. It's the Spirit. We are joined in the Spirit, made one family, relatives in the Spirit. "We are not defined by flesh or by law," says Paul. We are defined by and given life by the God who

brings the dead to life and calls into existence things that did not exist—like hope, faith, belonging, forgiveness, transformation, and life, abundant life.

We move forward in our life's journey, guided by this promise—the promise of presence, acceptance, and grace.

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