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ABRAM'S AMAZING RACE OF FAITH

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Genesis 12:1-4a, Romans 4: 1-5, 13-17, and John 3:1-17

Congratulations! You have just won an all-inclusive trip to the land of your dreams! Sounds great, right? Just two catches: 1) you won't be told where you're going until you get there, and 2) you aren't coming back.

This is what God is telling Abram this week: he will be leaving everything behind – family, friends, ancestral homelands, everything he knows and loves – and is going to go... somewhere.

Ever watch that show, “The Amazing Race”? Teams go from one clue to the next, never quite sure of where they're going, trying to get to the next challenge, the next detour, the next pit stop. This brings that to mind, except that Abram's amazing race won't be finished with \$1,000,000 and a plane ticket home. He's being offered an amazing race to a new place, guided by nothing but the faith that God will be there with him every step of the journey. God is offering him all these blessings, and all he has to do is... leave everything he knows behind.

Now, Abram could have said, “Thanks but no thanks, God, I'm happy here.” But if he had done that, what would have happened to him? He would have had his nice quiet life, he would have had his wife and his slave's son, he would have raised livestock and lived and died, and nobody would have ever known his name. However, because Abram freely chose to follow God and leave everything behind, his faith has become the foundation of 3 major religions in the world, and we are reading about his life story today. Everyone who has ever been touched by the faith of a Jewish, Christian, or Muslim follower can be accredited to Abram's leap in faith. Blessed to be a blessing to the world indeed.

So where do we get our ticket for Abram's Amazing Race of faith? How did Abram get so lucky to get chosen for this sweet gig? What did he do to deserve such an overwhelming blessing? For that we turn to the Romans scripture.

The short and rather annoying answer is: nothing. Abram didn't DO anything to be chosen. He didn't have the best sacrifice, he didn't lead the largest group of

converts, and he didn't live while committing the fewest sins. All Abram did was live a faithful life. Not perfect, not blameless, but faithful.

Now, this just doesn't jive. You have to work hard to earn the good life, right? Dad used to sit me down for these "Where is your life going?" talks whenever I came home from college. "What are you going to do to earn a living? How are you going to support yourself? What do you plan to be doing 10 years from now? You need to be a hardworking member of society." It's instilled into us from the very beginning. The United States is a land of self-made hardworking people who have pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps. You work hard all week; you get your paycheck. You get what you deserve and nothing more, so you better work hard to make sure you earn it. I've got to perform enough good deeds and enough sacrifices and acts of penance and follow every rule and law down to the letter to earn my way to heaven.

Riiiiiiight?

Wrong.

God has turned that whole paradigm on its ear. Abram didn't earn his way into heaven, and we don't either. God shouldn't be reduced to a "to-do" list for Heaven, and our Christianity shouldn't either. The quote is, "Well done, good and faithful servant," not "Well done, hardworking and industrious servant."

But checklists are so much easier than blind faith. There's that moment of satisfaction when you cross something off the list, that finality of "Well, that's done!" Faith can't be completed as easily as crossing chores off a list, but I think that's why we have the tendency to do so. It's so much easier to not lie, not steal, not commit murder, and wait until I get my "paycheck" for living a good life. It's a lot tougher to trust God every step of every day, to truly and completely walk in faith alone.

This doesn't mean that walking in faith negates the need to follow the laws or do good work for the body of Christ. What does walking in faith, living in faith, look like? If you live the way that Jesus taught, you still don't lie, steal, or commit murder, but it's the motivation that differs. By living a faithful life, our relationship with God is the reason we do what we do. The rules provide a structure to live a faithful life, but the rules can't be the whole substance of our belief, and Heaven needs to be more than a carrot bribing us to behave or Hell a threat to keep us in line. Jesus said that the two most important commandments are to love the Lord

your God with all your strength, might, and soul, and to love your neighbor as yourself. If that is our guiding principle, then everything else will fall into place, but that **MUST** come first.

God's promise to Abram wasn't through law, but through righteousness of faith. And by faith, by the grace of God, this promise has been extended to all those who walk in faith, just as Abram did.

And this is what Nicodemus was struggling with. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a church leader, a pastor of his day. He would have known the ins and outs of the Jewish laws, and all the instructions and rituals involved in following them. A friend described the Jewish idea of the afterlife as a concert in a huge arena. The better life you lead, the closer to the front row you get. If you lead a poor life, you still go to the same concert, but you're stuck way in the back, and you don't get to see anything but the people in front of you having a better time than you. If that's the case, the Pharisees would have known every rule and regulation to be followed to get those front row passes to the afterlife party. And yet, Nicodemus came to Jesus seeking more.

Reading the passage, I can almost imagine Nicodemus as a lawyer in court, yelling, "Objection! Your honor, that's impossible!" in response to what Jesus was saying. "How can anyone be born after growing old?" "How can these things be?"

Nicodemus would echo our doubt to the Romans passage. "That's just not the way the world works!" Sarah, Abraham's wife, laughed when she was told she would have a son long after childbearing age. "That's just not the way the world works, God!" In a few weeks, we will be doing the drama, "We Met Him," telling the story of women who met Jesus. I will be playing a woman who was told for 12 years that she was unclean. You're worthless spiritually dangerous human trash below regard. Nothing will save you! "That's just the way the world is."

Nicodemus's thought process is so stuck on "the way the world is" that he can't see what could be through the grace of God. We are in the midst of the journey of Lent, a journey to life through death, the end of everything, and yet... the beginning of everything. Nicodemus traveled through darkness to visit Jesus, clinging to the shadows, disguising what he was doing. Darkness hides our ugliness, keeps us concealed. At the same time, darkness can be confusing and frightening. It makes everything unsure. But that's ok to. This is a new birth. And birth can be a messy, frightening thing. Abram had to travel in the darkness of "not knowing" before he could reach the Promised Land. The disciples traveled through the darkness of the

crucifixion and death of all their hopes for Jesus' ministry before they could reach Easter Sunday.

And that's where this Lenten journey is leading as well: the joy of Easter morning, surprise and happiness beyond our wildest dreams, and God showing us once and for all, that God is not limited to what the world would label as "possible". "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send his son to the world to condemn the world, but to save it."

But, we're not there yet. We're still on that journey to the cross. We're in the darkness, asking Jesus, "What? But why?? How??? That's just not the way the world works!" And that's why we continue walking in faith. Strictly following the letter of the laws and living by our own "redemption check lists" doesn't allow for the unfathomable, unbelievable, completely unexpected saving grace of God.

Will we be so stuck in our own lives that we don't leave room for the wonder and redemption of the resurrection to change us? Will we be willing to give up our old lives for a promise of a future beyond all fathom and reckoning? Will we be able to put aside reliance on our own hard work and ingenuity, and give control over to God, to walk in faith with Jesus, all the way to Gethsemane, the cross, and eternal life beyond? This is why we have the journey of Lent every year: to be born again and to start the journey with Jesus anew.

Everyone, I have homework for you. Go somewhere where there are people. Could be people you know, could be strangers if you're feeling bold. Count out 10 people. Odds are, at least 9 of them are suffering from something, even if they're generally happy people. Could be stress or health or family/relationship issues, there's no shortage of issues in society.

Now pick one of them. Do something nice for them. Share your chips. Offer to give them a book from your collection. If they're carrying something heavy, offer to lend a hand (metaphor not intended). Heck, just smile at them and casually ask how their day is going. Perhaps they'll think it's weird at first, but that's only because we've become so insular. Go change that.

This assignment won't be marked. Maybe you'll earn extra credit, but that's a fringe benefit. Do this assignment every day.