

Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17
Second Sunday in Lent A; 03.05.23; G. Miles Smith+

In the old tradition of the “three-point sermon”, I want to talk about *three things* from the scripture this morning which might be of some help to you. They are: (1) *the scandal of particularity*, (2) *the priority of grace*, and (3) *the invitation to trust*.

The “*scandal of particularity*” is a way that theologians have sometimes talked about a very curious reality in the Bible. And the way we may have thought about it ourselves, without realizing it, is when we have wondered on a Sunday morning in church : *Why in the world does the Bible compel us to acquaint ourselves with all kinds of very particular people, places, customs, histories, and stories?* Seriously? So, today it is Abram who later became known as Abraham, the people of Israel, Jerusalem and the Temple, the Apostle Paul, a Pharisee named Nicodemus, and of course Jesus. The Bible contains such a swirl of details that lands in the midst of all the other details we are constantly immersed in in our daily lives. And so you may wonder: *Do I really need to know all this?* Do I really need more details to sort out at church? Why does the God of the whole world stake so much on such details in the Bible—like this one man named Abram in ancient Mesopotamian history and then, much later, one man named Jesus—not to mention so many other men and women in particular times and places?

Because, when you think about it, the Bible could have been very different from what it is. It could have been just a compendium of good ideas to live by—a handbook of basic beliefs and commandments—like a catechism. But instead, what we have is this dizzying array of...very particular people and places, and more. And the Bible invites us to do some work getting to know them. *But is it really necessary?!*

And I guess the answer is connected to a secondary question: *Are you and I really necessary?* There can be voices in the world and voices inside of our own heads that say No. But the voices in the Bible say that the particulars matter. And that they matter to God. God doesn't live in a detached realm of the abstract and the otherworldly. God paid attention to some stranger in Mesopotamia and started something new in the world that has lasted ever since. That God paid attention to so many others, as told in the Bible. And that God is paying attention to you and me in this place and time, in the same way. God cares about the particulars. That can be scandalous—but it can also be wonderful.

So the second thing to say today is that when God cares about the particulars, it is an act of grace. It is a gift. With Abram, a gift was coming of generations to follow who would also know that God cared about the particulars of their lives and were called to live differently...so that the rest of the world might know that God cared about the particulars of their lives and their call to live differently. *God's caring about ancient particulars flows right toward God caring about you and me and everybody else.* God didn't have to care like this. A lot of stories of the old gods are stories of gods who didn't care or only cared as long as they were interested. The old gods were fickle. The God of Abraham, the God of Jesus, is steadfast and gracious.

So the third thing to say is that the first response to such a God is trust. Life could have been meaningless. None of the particulars could have mattered: Just do the best you can and try to enjoy something before you die. It could have been that way. And yet the Bible says that God is a giver and all life is a gift, a grace, an unexpected blessing, an unimaginable promise of God, who pays attention to the particulars. God invited *Abraham* to trust God's promise. The *Psalmist* invited the worshippers going up to Jerusalem and the Temple to trust that “The LORD himself watches over you”. The apostle *Paul* invited the Roman Christians to have faith in God's grace. *Jesus* invited the pharisee *Nicodemus* to know God as a gracious giver of spiritual insight. *God is trustworthy because God is gracious. God is trustworthy even and especially when life is unfamiliar and unknown.*

This is what I believe the Bible says. And because God attends to the particulars of your life too, then there is a path ready for you...for the Spirit of God to reveal God's grace to you, specific to your life. Maybe it has already happened to you. Maybe it is yet to be revealed.