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- Jessica: Welcome to Lectionary Kick-start.  
We're sparking your thoughts for Sunday as you plan your sermon or teaching lesson.  
I'm your host and producer, Jessica Bordeleau, here with Dr. David Schmitt and Dr. Peter Nafzger.  
They're both professors of homiletics here at Concordia Seminary St. Louis.  
You can hear all about us in our introductory episode.  
But trust me, they are pretty good preachers.  
All right, let's get started.  
Peter, where are we in the church here?
- Peter: We're at the second Sunday in Lent.
- Jessica: And David, what are the texts this week?
- David: Genesis 12, Romans 4, John 3, and Psalm 121.
- Jessica: As always, I ask each of you to tell me which text you would choose to preach about.  
To determine who goes first, in our readings today, we hear about the call of Abram being told to move far away.  
What's the farthest you've ever moved?
- David: Moved?  
Like not the farthest I've ever traveled.
- Jessica: No, moved.
- David: Just literally moved.
- Jessica: Yeah.
- David: I guess Detroit, for me.
- Jessica: St. Louis to Detroit?
- David: Yeah.
- Jessica: Okay.
- David: That would be the farthest.
- Peter: Yeah, I moved to Germany for a year.  
So I guess...
- David: Oh, look at you. Wow.  
Okay.
- Peter: And then I moved to Minnesota.

So that's probably about the same as Detroit.

Jessica: The farthest I've ever moved was when I left here at the seminary, and I moved to the Twin Cities in Minnesota. But still, you win, Peter. You go first, Germany guy.

Peter: All right.  
All right.  
I am going to preach on the text from Genesis 12.

Jessica: Can you say Gennicus again?  
That was great.

Peter: I'm going to preach on the text from Genesis 12, the story of the call of Abram.

David: This is part of the sermon series, right?

Peter: Yeah.  
So I'm going with this series of Old Testament readings for the season of Lent, where I'm preaching on different stories from the Old Testament that collectively tell the big story of the Old Testament leading up to Jesus. And so last week, it talked about the persistence of guilt. And then today, I want to think about God's call of Abraham. And kind of the phrase that at least is in my mind right now, thinking about it, is the turn of grace. So God turns explicitly and intentionally and finally and fully to his creation that has fallen in grace through his calling of Abram. So as I talked about a little bit last week, kind of there's a... at least I would have a series goal. You know, sometimes we talk about goals of a sermon. I would also have a goal of the series, which would be to enhance biblical literacy and immerse people in the story of the Old Testament, so that when we get to the focus on Jesus and Holy Week, we rightly locate him as part of something much bigger. You'll never understand Jesus if you don't understand the Old Testament.

David: Mm-hmm.  
Right.

Peter: And so understanding who he came from and what promises he came to fulfill are really kind of important. I'm going to walk each week through a part of that story of the Old Testament. The sermon goal, I would want to focus on God's grace to and through Abram. So with that in mind, Jessica, would you read Genesis 12, 1 to 3?

Jessica: 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.

Peter: The rest of the story, not just the Old Testament, but the whole biblical story, all until the Lord returns, is kind of set in motion with Abram.  
And so the turn of grace is kind of the phrase I'm thinking about, would be about how the story turns here, the big picture story.  
It turns very specifically in a gracious direction.  
And this language from God to Abram foreshadows and explicitly names that all nations, all peoples, all families of the earth will be blessed through him.  
And so Abram's kind of a big deal.  
So I want to think about how this is the start of a story that then leads, of course, to Jesus, who is the one that is anointed with the Spirit, who then goes to Israel, but also goes to all nations.  
Jesus is explicitly sent to Israel, the lost sheep of Israel.  
But there's glimpses throughout his ministry of going to all nations.  
And so I'd want to highlight that.  
And then, of course, in Matthew 28, he makes disciples of all nations.  
And so the move here in the sermon somehow would be highlighting what God is beginning and doing through Abram.  
He continues into Jesus' life and ministry.  
And then after his death and resurrection, he explicitly sends the disciples to all nations.  
And so this idea that the story turns on God's grace.  
But then there's also kind of another sense in which there's a turn of grace.  
And that's where I'd want to talk to the the hearers gathered.  
I was thinking about, you guys know what it's like when you're trying to get somewhere and you're following directions.  
And you get to that point where the GPS just tells you, you have to turn around.  
No longer will it route you, reroute another direction.  
You just have to turn around.  
And you drive a little farther.  
I think about it sometimes on the highway, you try to, you think, okay, it'll just reroute here a little bit.  
And then it'll say, no, you still got to turn around.  
The blue arrow will go back.  
And then you go a little further.

Jessica: You messed up so much that you need to turn around.

Peter: It's such a turn that you're kind of going a different direction.  
You have to, you hit a dead end.  
A little bit like the turn of grace is where God is turning us.  
We're no longer going in the same direction in the sense that we're, we're serving ourselves, we're focused on ourselves.  
But he's turning us toward others.  
But the story turns on God's grace.  
And your life is turned around by God's grace, where we are

no longer even just celebrating what God has done for me.  
I think sometimes Lutherans, we get, we rightly emphasize how good God is to us.  
And we can so rejoice in and celebrate and give thanks for what he's done for me,  
that we, we forget or we neglect that he's turning us toward.  
You know, Abram was a blessing not just for himself,  
but for all nations to, to be a blessing to others.  
And so the, if there's a problem that I'm addressing in this sermon, it would be a  
temptation to kind of hoard God's blessing and hoard God's grace and to celebrate  
and  
practice it, but then have it stop with us.  
And so I want to encourage a turn away in grace toward others.

Jessica: That's good.  
I can think of a children's message right away.

Peter: All right.

Jessica: Yeah.  
So if you give the kids a mirror and you say now, who do you see in the mirror?  
And they would just see themselves could be a little mirror.  
And you'd say, okay, now put the mirror away and look out there.  
Now, how many people do you see?  
And I'd see everyone in the church.  
That would be great.

Peter: Yeah.  
I mean, I think part of the idea that I'm kind of  
finding my way towards is a turn outside of ourselves.  
So Augustine's definition of sin, kind of famous  
definition of sin is that we're turned in on ourselves.  
And that's even possible, I think, when we celebrate  
his grace, that we think of his grace only for us.  
We're turned in on how good God is to me or even to us as a community.  
But I want to direct them, yes, give thanks for and celebrate and proclaim  
God's grace to your hearers, but also help  
them see that that grace is not just for them.  
It's for the... explicitly for all nations.  
But those around you who are not there, God's  
grace is turning us in that direction, too.

David: So last week, you had persistence in guilt, right?  
And now you've got turned toward grace.  
And there's also, I mean, in a sense, there's also a persistence in grace, right?  
I mean, like you when you did that, that overview of the things that have happened.  
One of the things that has happened throughout the Old Testament up to this  
point is that God has been persistent in his grace.  
He's just doing it in different ways, but he's constantly returning to save.  
And so, particularly, I guess, with the Tower of Babel, we've got this  
picture, we just see everybody dispersed and enact kind of a judgment of God.

And now we see how God's going to go out to all those nations and bring his grace to them.

Peter: Yeah, all the people he just scattered, through Abram and his offspring, he will bless all of those same people.  
And so you do get this... and this is where it's neat to sometimes back up and just look at the big picture story, that the biblical story, the true story of all things, is that God is repeatedly kind and gracious and good even when his people are not.  
And to me, that's really encouraging for a congregation.  
The turn of grace is to Abram in the big story, but he repeatedly turns to us in grace.  
And he repeatedly turns us in grace toward others.  
So there is never a place for despair or self-infatuation, because God is constantly being gracious, and he's constantly turning us away for ourselves.

David: Yeah, and you could ask yourself, you know, how is God turning me in grace toward others in my life today?

Peter: Yeah.

David: Right.

Peter: Yeah.  
And how is he turning us as a congregation, us as a community?  
Right.  
That could be really helpful for your local situation.

David: Well, I just think it's so interesting that God chooses to do this by choosing one person.

Peter: Yeah.

David: That is just, you know...

Peter: Well, it's interesting, and it's kind of scandalous.  
And we call it the scandal of particularity, that God just decides, you know, why did he choose Abram?  
For no reason, it seems, except that God decided to choose Abram.

David: And then it's not like Abraham had it easy.

Peter: Right.

David: I mean, there's this whole thing in Egypt with Sarah, and then there's not having a child, and then there's a sacrifice for your child.  
I mean, it's just like...

Peter: You know, I suppose the one thing about Abram that is, in hindsight, you can kind

of see, God chose someone to be a blessing to all nations through his child, and that person he chose couldn't have children.

David: Right.  
Right.

Peter: So it was going to be some sort of all God's work, some miraculous sign, and that's what we get.

David: Right.  
And the things that we would put up as the reasons why God can't work this way through me.  
It's like, yeah, you're not God.

Peter: Right, right, right.  
And not only might he work through you, but he's turning you in his grace today to be a blessing to others in little or big ways.

Jessica: And now it's time for the Ask Jessica jar, the part of the show where we pick a question from the jar, and I answer it from the perspective of a person in the pew.  
All right, Peter, pick a question.

Peter: What are some questions I could ask parishioners as I plan this sermon?

Jessica: You could ask them, what things have you turned from?  
That could mean anything little or something big.

David: I like that idea of turn from and turn toward, right?  
Because repentance is turning, and we often think of it as turning from sin, but we're also turning toward something.

Peter: Yeah.

David: Right, and it's a turn toward grace.

Peter: Yeah.

Jessica: You could ask them, what things are they struggling with because they feel challenged to turn towards or away from something, and it's difficult?

Peter: Yeah, maybe something that they recognize they want to turn toward or turn from.  
And that might just get them thinking and help you see it, get a little glimpse into kind of their lives, what they imagine at least.

Jessica: That's always nice when pastors show that they're interested in what we think and that they consider our point of views as they write a sermon for us.  
So that's great.  
Thank you, Peter.  
David, what about you?  
What would you preach about?

David: Well, I am going to preach on the text from John 3.  
So the Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night.  
It's a great text.  
It has so... I mean, you know, it's just one of those things.  
There's just so much in here.

Jessica: It is.  
I love Nicodemus.  
His whole story is so interesting.

David: I know.  
And that's the thing.  
That's how I'm going to approach it.  
I thought, you know, there's so much... you can get  
into the text and really go deep in the details.  
And you've got the beautiful, for God so loved the world in this text.  
I mean, there's so much in here.  
But I'm thinking of taking kind of a big picture of Nicodemus.  
Because you're right.  
If you trace, you know, if you just look at him through the Gospel of John,  
the narrative arc of his life is beautiful.  
Right?  
So the first time we meet him is here.  
And he's coming to Jesus at night.  
And he's asking questions of Jesus.  
So he's a Pharisee who's not sure that he understands what Jesus is doing.  
And he's coming to Jesus asking questions, trying to figure out answers.  
Then the next time we see him is in John 7.  
Jesus has been upsetting the Pharisees.  
The crowds are gathering around him.  
They have sent officers in order to bring him to them.  
And the officers come without Jesus.  
And they're like, why didn't you bring Jesus?  
And they're like, well, nobody ever speaks like he speaks.  
And so then they're chastising the officer.  
And Nicodemus, who's one of the Pharisees, stands up for Jesus.  
In a way, he asks a procedural question.  
He's like, does our law condemn a man without a hearing?  
Right?  
And so then they're like, you know, they turn on him.  
So that's the second time you see him.  
And then the last time you see him is at the very end of the Gospel of John.  
After Jesus has been taken down from the cross, he's being taken to the tomb.  
And we're told that Nicodemus comes carrying, I think, 70 pounds of spices,  
of myrrh and spices.  
And so there's a beautiful revelation, a public revelation of him as a disciple  
who's, you know, investing a lot of money in

a way of honoring this Jesus who has died.  
And so the narrative arc of Nicodemus, you come from him coming to Jesus in the middle of the night with questions to him coming to Jesus after Jesus has died with spices to anoint him.  
And it's this growth journey on the part of Nicodemus.

Jessica: So... Isn't that great?

Peter: It is interesting that, you know, as a Pharisee, usually the kinds of questions Pharisees ask of Jesus are questions of skepticism or entrapment.  
And he comes asking questions that are...  
I just love how beautifully, in some ways naive, at least, John seems to present to him, you know, well, how could, how could this happen?

David: I know.

Peter: He's generally interested.  
And so he's kind of a, he's a, he's a contrast to the other Pharisees that engaged Jesus.

David: Right.  
Yes.

Jessica: Maybe there were other Pharisees too who wondered, or like he said, we know that you're something because you're doing these signs, but he was the only one brave enough to not sit by and just do nothing.

David: Right.

Jessica: The whole institution was a little crooked, but he couldn't just sit there and not do it.  
Even if it's at night, at least he's like, okay, I have to find out the truth and do something.

David: And you know, it's interesting that the other two times he's mentioned in the gospel, there is a reference that he's the one who came to Jesus at night.  
And so it's almost as if he's known as the disciple who came to Jesus at night, right?  
He came to Jesus seeking, honestly seeking answers to his questions, not trying to entrap him, but he's coming under the cover of night so that it's not a public declaration.  
You've got that movement from private to public with the spices and I just find that interesting.  
So, so Jessica, if you could read verse three, verses one through three, and then verse nine and 10.

Jessica: Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.  
This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one else can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.

Jesus answered him, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus said to him, how can these things be?

Jesus answered him, are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?

David: Okay, so...

Jessica: Ouch!

David: I know, I know, I know.

So Nicodemus has questions, but he doesn't have the right answers.

And to be fair, the words of Jesus are a little obscure, you know, the spirits like the wind, it goes where it wills.

Jessica: It didn't seem to answer his question.

David: I know.

Jessica: He asked, how are you born again?  
And Jesus doesn't quite, yeah.

David: Right.

So Jesus offers these answers that are really deep and complex and that will become much clearer after his death and resurrection, right?

I mean, so like with much of the teaching of Jesus, there's this obscurity to it. It's not transparent and clear.

And Nicodemus is having trouble.

And so we see him early on as the guy who's coming for the right answers from Jesus.

And he's not able to understand.

And Jesus points out that you're a teacher in Israel and even you can't understand the things of God.

And so, and yet, and yet, Nicodemus persists.

In chapter seven, he's there confessing Jesus in a way.

And then at the very end of the gospel, he's confessing Jesus and his actions.

And so what I like about Nicodemus, at least for me, is that sometimes I think we can reduce religion to having the right answers.

And we want right answers.

And, and there's nothing wrong with systematic theology that provides us with answers.

But what I like about Nicodemus is that he has a relationship with Jesus, even though he doesn't have the right answers.

And he lives in that relationship with Jesus until the right answers come.

And I think sometimes for us as Christians, you know, the stumbling block is feeling you're stupid.

The stumbling block is that I don't know enough.

I can't get the right answers.

I try so hard to get the right answers.

And, and maybe in those situations, work on having a relationship with Jesus.  
And in a relationship with Jesus, the right answers will come, right?  
And so you're, you know, you're raising your kids,  
they ask you questions you can't yet understand.  
That doesn't mean they can't have a relationship with Jesus.  
Your relationship with Jesus, you're related to the Lord of the universe.  
Of course, you're not going to have all the right  
answers, but you can have a relationship with him.

Peter: And actually, since you brought up systematic  
theology has a way of We're talking about this.  
The faith which is believed, that's the information, that's the answers,  
that's all the stuff that Jesus says, which frankly we don't always fully understand.  
And then you've got the faith by which we believe, the trust in the heart.  
Sometimes we tend to put our faith in our own ability  
to understand or articulate the right answers.

David: Right.

Peter: When our faith is in the promise of Jesus, who then starts to unfold all that he has  
for us, and we begin to understand that, but that's  
kind of a work in progress of our whole lives.

David: And even sometimes you look at your own life and you think back to when you were  
younger and when you first started out as a teacher or a church worker or teaching  
Bible class, and you think back now and you're like, boy, I didn't know very much.  
You know, but you had a relationship with, you know, that God has called you to a  
relationship with him through his son, Jesus Christ.  
And in that relationship, you will discover the right answers.  
And I think sometimes, I don't know, for me, sometimes  
we privilege the answers before the relationship.  
And what I like about Nicodemus is Nicodemus clearly  
doesn't have the right answers, but he has a relationship.  
And that relationship bears fruit.

Jessica: That's so good.  
So many people don't come to church because they're not sure.

David: Right.

Jessica: Like, I'm not sure if I believe this or not, so I'm not going to come.  
Or I'm just not good enough to go.  
So I think that's great if the DCEs and pastors and Sunday  
school teachers let people know that it's okay that you come.  
You can keep coming here even though you haven't done everything right.  
It's okay that we have a relationship with  
people who haven't cleaned up their lives yet.

Peter: Well, and this, I mean, we talked about Genesis 12 earlier.

I mean, Abraham had no clue what God was going to do or even where he was going to lead him.

David: Right.

Peter: And yet, because of the promise that God made to him, the relationship, he was able to go forward just trusting that God would take care of things. And so in this sense, Nicodemus is kind of following in the footsteps of the people of God who never really fully understood him.

David: Right.

Yeah.

And so it's, you know, I mean, I understand that sometimes you can, you know, be dismissive of religion and not even want the right answers. You can be a lazy person who's not growing in the faith. But I think that sometimes we can be tempted to overemphasize the answers. And this text from Nicodemus invites us to start thinking about the relationship and to trust that the answers will come.

Jessica: Oh, that attitude will trickle down to the rest of us.

As you train your Sunday school teachers and your small group leaders, that it's okay that the people they're sharing their faith with don't have it all figured out yet.

And that they can invite them to come to church just the way they are, even if they're not sure.

Even if they're still stuck in sins that they can't get rid of, like you just come and the Holy Spirit will do his work.

That's really important.

That's good.

Thank you, David.

And now it's time for the Ask Jessica jar.

Bring it on.

David: Which image was most relatable?

Jessica: I like the image of Nicodemus coming at night, kind of secretly, covertly, because he's not quite sure to make the move yet.

But he's going to just find out what's going on until at the end where he's bringing too many pounds of spices to be ignored.

Right?

And so, like, there's this very, like, visual change in what happened in Nicodemus' life.

Even though he wasn't sure yet, he still kept listening.

He still kept being around Jesus' disciples.

David: Right.

That whole narrative arc is a beautiful picture.

And, you know, if we just limit it to this text, we don't see that larger work of God.

Because relationships take time.  
And with Nicodemus, it took the time of the whole gospel for him to be brought from coming in secret to publicly, as you said, bringing spices that can't be ignored.  
This guy's got a lot of spices.

Jessica: You both did that in your sermons where you talked about how many years from Noah to Abraham. And, you know, the narrative arc of Nicodemus. Keep doing that for us because we don't always remember. We just get little snippets in the text that week and we don't always know how to connect it to what happened before and after. That's helpful. Keep doing that. Thanks, guys. That's all for today. We have free resources to guide your next step in planning at [ConcordiaTheology.org](http://ConcordiaTheology.org). You should check it out. While you're there, you'll find episodes of our other podcast. It's called Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived. Twice a month, I host conversations with Concordia seminary faculty, and we talk about the ways in which their understanding of God and faith is real in their everyday lives. We recently recorded an episode on emotional intelligence, American politics and Christian witness, all kinds of great topics. You should look at it. You can find more episodes of Lectionary Kick-start and Tangible on any of the major podcast apps. If you'd like to see the show continue, please subscribe for free, share, leave a review, check out our YouTube channel. I'm your host and producer, Jessica Bordeleau. Join us next week here at Lectionary Kick-start, when Dr. David Schmitt and Dr. Peter Nafzger will spark your thoughts for next Sunday.

David: Oh, look at you.  
Well.  
Okay.  
No, it's not you.  
It's me.  
It's me.