

Myron Penner: During lent, we are having, I don't know, have we given a name to these things that we do before church, these teaching times. Let's call it the adult learning sessions. How about that? We're having adult learning sessions. And we're talking about church mission and gospel. And today, our topic was gospel and it coincides quite nicely with the text that we have in our lectionary readings for today. But my thinking about these were shaped by a song that I heard a snippet of this week, which is one of those songs that you hear and then you can never unhear, because it just loops inside of your head. And one of my favorite Canadian artists when I was growing up in the 80s and 90s was Tom Cochrane and Red Rider.

Tom Cochrane is usually an incredible song writer in my view. But, he's most popular for his were song, I think, Life is a Highway. I could sing it for you. I sang this morning in our adult session, I sang a children song. I think I maybe sang that one here once before. But Life is a Highway. And the song really doesn't say anything besides that, except that he wants to ride the highway. And some oversexual innuendos as well that go in there, I suppose. But, it got stuck in my head and then, I started prepping for our sermon this week and looking at our texts. And I found it to be quite a helpful loop in my head. But if you think about Life is a Highway, let's not say what is Tom Cochrane mean by that because he, in the song, clearly doesn't mean very much at all. But what's this image of the highway say to you? Journey? I couldn't hear that.

You're going somewhere, all right, for sure. Because this goes on and on and on, absolutely, absolutely. What would be the opposite image of a highway? Okay. There you go. What are some of things that you're not getting where I want you to go? I'm trying to be Socratic here and you're just-- Say that again. Okay, yes. See, you know what the opposite image of a highway is for me, a home. A home is the opposite of a highway because it's the destination. And if you think of it that way, well, maybe I'll go back. Let's think back a few years before our time. Highways were not friendly places, and they weren't safe places. And there's still not safe places for sure, because with all the people texting while they drive, which is awful. I've never done it. Ever.

Okay, I have but I'm endeavoring not to and definitely, my kids, Bella especially but my wife also, they will not let me do that. But, highways are very different places than homes. What are some of the ways that are different? They're not safe like a home. Not all homes are safe. Let's say, the way a home is supposed to be, what home should be. You have to pay attention on highway, for sure, don't you? Not a refuge. No walls, yeah. That's very true, absolutely. You see, I think we've got two different images here and I'm really, really struck by diving into the Old Testament texts. And as I did that, I was able to see new things in that old, old story that we all hear so much about Nicodemus and Jesus.

Nicodemus coming to Jesus in the cover of night. And struggling to find out what on earth is this guy talking about? And he definitely is sincere, he just doesn't get it. And Jesus sees exactly where he's missing and I don't think he makes it any easier, which is I think something we try to do too often, don't you? We're trying to make it too easy? We're trying to make it really simple, it's so simple. And it is, but it's just never easy. Faith is never easy and the gospel is always a call that comes to us from outside of us, and it always takes us out of the place that we try to nest in. The

place called home, then always takes us on the highway. So I don't forget to say this. Here's the thing I really want us to get from today.

If you are looking around you and you see the violence around you, maybe in homes, maybe on the streets, the rhetoric, the hatred, the economic instability around the world, the coronavirus, health problems. If you look around and you see places to be anxious, places that aren't safe, that you don't know how you're going to thrive. Because homes are supposed to be places where you thrive, right? Those would be a launching pad out, that's why when homes are bad, people don't flourish, right? It can't be prosperous. Well if you're looking around that, here's I think what I hear in the gospel today. You can be the change that the world needs, and you don't have to fear, and you don't have to anxiety. Let's look a little bit at the story of Abraham. And it starts in verse one of chapter 12, and I don't have the Pew Bible in front of me but it will be written on the back word is, if you have a hard time finding Genesis 12.

We have this incredible story of Abraham's summons, and at this point, he's not Abraham yet, he's still Abram. And it's because of this that he becomes Abraham, but we won't get into the whole name change. Except that it's significant because he is addressed by God, he is changed forever, and become someone completely different. And you see, Abraham is minding his own business and God comes to him. And he just says, go, just go, go out to the country that I will show you. How many travelers do we have here, just people like to travel?

What do you do before you travel? You get ready. Research. Yeah, some places you have to go get visas and shots, and you plan it, right? Because you want to minimize on the journey on the highway if we can say that, the danger. And here's what God says to Abraham, he says just go and there's no planning because you don't know where you're going, I will show you. Just go, go. And he says this, he says, leave your country, leave your people, leave your father's household and go. You see, what he's being told to do is to leave everything that will bring him well being security and prosperity and prominence. Abraham is called that everything that he knows will bring him these things. And one of the key issues that he is suffering with is barrenness, lack of children which in that culture in those days was not good at all. It was a kind of viewed as a curse.

So he's in a place of barrenness but he's being stretched a bit, and he says just go out, your country, leave your people, leave your father's household and all of these things that you are holding on to. And why is he supposed to go? He says go and you will be blessed, and you will be a blessing to all nations. You see there is a promise, the structure of Abraham's call is go, you will be blessed and you will be a blessing. Well, the absolutely amazing thing is that it says, and Abraham left. What does it say there in verse four? So Abraham left is the Lord told him. He was like really, he just did it. Now we often look at the binding of Isaac and that whole story on the altar as this moment of faith for him, which it obviously was. But this is just a significant, I don't think he has that moment unless he has this one first, because this is the structure of what it means to have faith.

what's really I think critical here as we think about the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus, is Nicodemus is working with a different understanding of what makes Abraham important. Paul fleshes this out for us in Romans four, and Paul can get very, very theological and very, very complicated but he's explaining what Jesus is trying to say to Nicodemus. When he says flesh inherits flesh, spirit produces spirit. He's saying, you don't get to be Abraham's child just by being genetically related. There has to be the same faith that Abraham has. You see what makes Abraham faithful is not, well here's what I have written here and I'll try to explain it. It says, what drives or calls for or summons Abraham's obedience when he just goes and his faith is not the structure of command and law. That's not what it does for him. His duty is not to God in that way. What structures that and what calls his obedience out is the promise and grace that he will receive.

And that's what is structuring everything about his faith, and that this is not just for him only, this is for the whole world. You see, Paul's way of saying that in Romans 4:16 is this, that the promise comes by faith so that it maybe by grace. You see it's not this duty, this command, this structure, he is going to do this and then he's going to receive that. So there's a promise that he goes. There's a God that he is committed to. And he's called then out on the highway, out on the place where he no longer has control. And this promise is a promise for all peoples, and what we see here is that, God is on a mission. And there's a whole story that this fits into, right? Because we've already heard in the earlier chapters of Genesis how God created all things and how we went to stray. And then God raises up this family of Abraham through whom everyone will be blessed and God will not leave us alone.

You see, everything that happens in Abraham's story is premised on this one thing and this one idea, this one concept, and that is to stay in safety is to remain barren, fruitless, in your place where you're not flourishing. To remain in safety is to remain that way. To remain within the confines of what you know, to stay at home and keep your home base the place that orients you for everything. That's not the place of blessing. The way is to go on the highway, to risk and that is the way hope. You see the good news then that we get out of these texts if we look at the Nicodemus story and we look at the Romans explanation which I think ties the two together. And a lot of ways that I can't get into here and the story of Abraham's call is, we get a picture of what the good news is that we've been given and the good news that shapes us.

And the good news I think that we were been given is that, there's no need for fear and anxiety, the world needs to be changed but we can be the change that the world needs. Because God summons each one of us, like God called Abraham to go, to be blessed and to be a blessing. And there's kind of three things that I get from this passage about what the good news really is here. As we look at these three passages and I'm just going to go through them relatively quickly. So first of all, I want to sort of say good news is a highway. The good news is a highway. Tom Cochrane said life is a highway, I want to say the good news is a highway. You can't stay at home, you can't make your nest, you have to get on on a highway. And first of all, is the good news is fundamentally God's nature. Jesus is God's good news to us, because what we see is that God calls and goes, and that's who God really is.

And we spent some time this morning talking about how this works in terms of the idea of the trinity. But here in the story, I just want to get this bare bones basic, God does not leave us on our own. God goes out. What's that famous verse that we read today? If you've learned one verse, it's probably this one, right? All say it with me, For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. You see God's deep, deep desire is to bring life to all people everywhere. That's the promise. That's the promise that is given into Abraham and is fulfilled in Jesus.

You see God calls and God goes, and as we were talking about it this morning, you see God's very nature is shown to us in Jesus. He is the word who tells us who God is. Jesus is what God looks like. And what we see in this John's passages that God's nature is always to bring what is not God into relationship with God, in order to bring shalom, which is the rule of God. In order to put everything into a place so that they may flourish. So the first thing the good news is God's nature. That's what the gospel is all about, it's this missionary God who is on a mission to save us, to save you. But not just us, but to save everyone. And the second thing is that, it's transformative.

If you look at these stories both Nicodemus and Abraham sort of run into this, that Jesus is pretty stubbornly resistant to being changed, you're going to be change if you meet him, if you really, really meet him. God at work and to be partners with God in what God is doing. And that means third thing is that this gospel is missionary, and its missionary in the deep, deep sense. Because we are blessed by being a blessing. You see it's not just simply that we get sent out, it's that part of the receiving is going out on the highway. As Abraham went and said I'm leaving the things that I know and I can basically manage and will bring me prominence in my community. And he was apparently by all accounts a prominent person in his community, respected member of the patriarch.

And all of these different things he was quite prosperous and he just went out to the place that God would show him. But I think that's what we have being announced to us today. I don't know if you've seen the movie Evan Almighty, its one redeeming feature is that it has Steve Carrell in it and his impossible to be bad. But how many of you have seen that movie, Evan Almighty? It's kind of like a modern day Noah's Arc story. And because of Steve Carrell, it really is worth watching, apart from that, it really isn't. But, it's about this guy who gets this call and it transforms his life incredibly and he doesn't want it. And all these things happened to him and it's really clear that it's God doing this to him, and God's telling it to him.

And there's this one line that I will always remember, I loved it, it's great. There's this one point, because I've felt like this before where Steve Carrell's character, Evan says, God, he's talking to God like I know everything you do, you do because you love me, but could you just love me a little less? Because this life has being turned upside down. And you see, that movie actually shows this kind of transformation, that he gets blessed as he cannot be doing the things that God has for him to do and that God is doing around him. And others are blessed because of it.

You see God summons Abraham to go and Abraham accepts and embraces that call. He believed a promise and he obeyed and he asked no questions. And he believed that promise without any visible evidence of, and this is what the Bible is telling us is meant by faith. And you see God is calling us, each one of us, you and me individually but also all of us together. On an adventure out on to the highway, a place of risk and uncertainty because we are not in control but God is. But also a path that is ultimately the path of blessing, and even though that blessing does not take the form that we always think it should and that we anticipate, it is the place and the path of shalom, for us and for the world. And as we respond to God's call to us in Jesus and as we trust completely in Jesus for our security, for our well-being, for our prosperity, for our prominence.

We are changed into the kind of people who bring God's presence and God's shalom, that's what I mean when I say you can be the change that the world needs. Because it's not about necessarily going out and picketing, it might be, I'm not sure what God's calling you to do. But really, it's a much deeper kind of change and it was due kind of presence in the world where we bring God's shalom, God's rule. So, go. Go to that place that God will show you, I don't know where it is. I think he's calling us as a perished, to go, to get up, go out. To be blessed and to be a blessing, embrace the call, believe the promise. Amen.