

Seeing Stars

Genesis 15:1-6

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

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15 The word of God came to Abram in a vision, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” ² But Abram said, “O God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” ³ And Abram said, “You have given me no offspring, so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” ⁴ But the word of God came to him, “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.” ⁵ God brought Abram outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then God said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” ⁶ And Abram believed God, and God reckoned it to Abram as righteousness.

From the story of Adam and Eve, our Narrative Lectionary takes a leap—past Cain and Abel, past Noah and the flood, past the Tower of Babel. It touches down in the story of Abraham.

Abraham’s story is a new paradigm in the relationship between God and us. God does a weird thing. God decides to engage—deeply—with a particular family. The story God’s relationship with Abraham and Sarah and their descendants continues for 38 chapters, to the end of Genesis. Why does God, the Creator of the Universe, invest in one family’s hopes, dreams, failures and frustrations? If God loves all, why focus on one?

The late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks offers one possibility. Before Abraham, human beings had yet to become responsible. We floundered and blamed and acted on passion or with the crowd. Abraham finally shows inner strength. He’s not always right, or good—none of us are. But Abraham knows that what happens in life depends, at least to some extent, on him—on the way he exercises his own judgement. Maybe God decided to get personal with one person because God knows that only by investing in the day-to-day realities of our lives will we grow into responsible partners for God.

God seems to want—to expect—us to be responsible partners.

This relationship between God and Abraham begins in Genesis 12 when God calls Abraham. In one of the more famous passages from Genesis. God says to Abraham:

“Go from your country and your people ... to the land that I will show you. ² 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. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

God trusts an immigrant. Abraham’s family leaves home. But by chapter 15, they have been moving a lot; hundreds of miles on foot. They face real hardship and suffering. The

promises God made—land and children, are in no way fulfilled. Then come the verses that begin chapter 15.

Rabbi Sacks says Abraham's responsibility is most evident when he argues with, or pushes back against, or negotiates with God. At the beginning of chapter 15, God says, "don't be afraid, Abraham, I've got you." It's clearly meant to soothe and assure him. God knows that Abraham is in a hard place, that he's suffering. "I am your shield. A reward is waiting you." But Abraham does not sound comforted. "I'm going through all of this, God, because you called me. I've endured all of this because of you. But I've gotten nothing from you yet. If I were to die today, my inheritance would go to the steward of my house, Eliezar. Not my own child."

I wonder if any of you sympathize with Abraham? Have you ever found yourself on what feels like a long, long journey? You set out with great hope, with expectation. But the reward that you expected never materialized? What do you feel? Angry... frustrated... cheated... bitter... ready to give up?

Faith, to me, is most evident when we don't get what we want or expect. In our anger, frustration, bitterness, exhaustion, we turn to God and ask, "what's going on?" "Where are you?" "Why me?" That, to me, is faith. The refusal to accept the delay or deferral of God's good promises.

Every life with God will include powerful periods of God's apparent absence. Something was promised you. You wait and wait, so long that it's unbearable. The suffering feels too much.

If you learn from Abraham, learn that it's OK to push back against God. It's not unfaithful to question God. It's a sign of your responsibility. It's you, demanding God's fidelity meet your own. It's you, imagining the world that should be, a world different than the world that is. This same instinct allows Abraham's spiritual descendants, Moses and the prophets, to confront powerful kings and demand justice. If you're going to have the courage to confront kings, you start by pushing back against God, saying, "God, I've kept my end of the deal. Now, you do the same."

But that push-pull is not the last word in this passage. There's one more thing. After God affirms God's promise to Abraham, God brings Abraham outside. It's night. God says, "come out. Look up. See the stars. Count them. Those are your descendants."

Do you remember the last time you looked at the stars? What does it feel like?

I remember one night during the first of our family's trips out west. We were at Bryce Canyon, Utah. After a ranger presentation on astronomy, we took our blanket and chairs out to the canyon rim, sat down, and looked up. It looked like this image on the screen. A sea of stars.

Looking at stars is perhaps the most humbling thing a person can do. If you want to feel small, look up. There are far more stars in the heavens than there are grains of sand on every beach in the world. Our place in the cosmos is unspeakably small. But looking into space is also looking into time. The light that reaches your eye from every star has been travelling for tens of thousands of years to reach you. Star lifetimes are measures in millions, sometimes billions, of years.

The night sky is the quickest way to put you back in touch with your insignificance.

But instead of crushing us, this insignificance actually ennobles us. A few of you have read Dacher Keltner's book *Awe*, which is about the developing science of wonder. Awe does make us feel small, but it also makes us feel connected. We feel that we are a part of something much bigger than we can understand. Awe soothes our nerves and calms our anxieties. We sense that we are participating in a great, beautiful, bewildering, inexhaustible mystery. We're a small part of it all—but a part of it, nonetheless.

Keltner tells a story about a study he led, which was a rafting trip down the American River in California with two boats—one full of teenagers from an urban high school in Oakland, the other with vets struggling to adjust to life after the military. A week after the trip, the teens and veterans felt less stress, reported a greater feeling of well-being, better relationships with family and friends. The veterans showed a 32% drop in symptoms associated with PTSD. One of those veterans wrote this:

Looking up at the star-spattered sky, I thought about the universe and how infinite it is. It makes what I do feel less important; but the opportunity of what I could do more powerful and lightweight. I never see how many stars are in the sky like I did tonight.

I think about those teenagers and those veterans looking up at the night sky. I think of sitting on the rim of the canyon, looking up at the night sky. And I think about Abraham, looking up at the night sky.

I think it's God who invites us there. The same God who expects our responsibility, who welcomes our protests and challenges—that same God says, "come out... look up... you belong to something far bigger and more beautiful than you will ever understand. You belong to me."