

Pastor's Message – 3/13/2022
Genesis 15:1-18

Almost every day we hear things that are hard to believe. Some of the commercials on television are hard to believe. It is hard to believe that one certain brand of toothpaste will make our teeth their brightest and whitest, or if we wear a certain brand of aftershave we will drive the women wild, or if we use a certain dish detergent we will have the softest hands, or brand X will get our clothes cleaner than any other detergent, or one brand of pain reliever is stronger or faster or more effective than any other.

Facebook tells us one thing. Instagram tells us another. There is no shortage of wild thoughts and news on Twitter. We often find it difficult to believe politicians when they tell us they have the answers to such problems as crime, unemployment, and immigration. In our Bible reading from Genesis today, we find God speaking with Abraham, and the LORD tells Abraham that even though he is advanced in years, his wife will bear him a son. This is so unbelievable that Abraham's wife, Sarah, actually laughs when she overhears the baby announcement.

Abram, not until chapter 19 in Genesis will God change his name to Abraham, had a problem. God had made some promises, but Abram saw no way for them to come true. God had promised him gazillions of offspring, yet he had no children. God said they would come. Heirs and land form the two core promises at stake in our story today and God's covenant with Abram. Already aged at the journey's start, Abram finds it more difficult to trust. Without an heir, God's promise of land has no lasting meaning. Will God prove trustworthy?

Abram sounds a bit low, but who can blame him? He's been faithful enough, but God hasn't come through yet. But I was struck in our reading from Genesis today how Abram isn't afraid to engage with God. First he says, "O LORD, what will You give me, for I continue childless . . ." Later, when God promises him all this land, he says, "How am I to know that I shall possess it?" Give me a sign!

It's a back-and-forth conversation. God is big enough to listen to our doubts and questions; God encourages us to be in prayer and have relationship with Him. In Abram's willingness to speak his heart before God, Abram speaks for us. Abram gets a divine pep talk, but it takes a bit of convincing before he really believes that God will come through in the end.

"Count the stars, if you are able," was the Lord's challenge to Abram. Abram, of course, couldn't and for good reason. There are an estimated 100 billion stars in our galaxy, the Milky Way. If you were to count them, aside from the problem of keeping them straight so as not to double count or missing any, how long would it take? If you counted one star per second, it would take you about 100 billion seconds, or about 3,000 years. Depending on the date of Abram's life, if he started counting in Genesis 15, he would be just finished or just finishing today. That's a long time.

And that is just our galaxy. Astronomers tell us that there are at least 100 billion galaxies in the observable universe. If each have 100 billion stars, that makes . . . that's a lot of stars. You can do the math; I can't.

"So shall your descendants be," said God in obvious hyperbole! In any event, God was assuring Abram that he and Sarai (her name is changed later also) would become parents of countless descendants.

Sometimes the Old Testament can seem irrelevant to us. Some will say that when Jesus came, He fulfilled the Old Testament and now all we need to focus on is the New Testament. Even in today's reading, God promises descendants and land and those may no longer be considered as suitable or valued rewards for faithfulness.

God's promises don't even pass the common sense test:

-- Common sense told Abram that he and Sarai were not going to have any children. But God's promise said something else.

-- Common sense told Abram that he was a desert herdsman, not the father of a nation. But God's promise said something else.

-- Common sense told Abram that he should carefully save his valuable livestock as insurance against hard times. But God's promise said something else.

-- Common sense told Abram that the divine God of the universe couldn't be held accountable by any human-devised contractual agreement. But God's promise said something else.

-- Common sense told Abram that there was "no such thing as a free lunch" -- so he must be expected to pay for this land somehow. But God's promise said something else.

-- Common sense told Abram that the divine didn't need to make the "covenant walk" between carcasses of half-hewn animals. But God's promise said something else.

In Genesis we have a story of a man who took a leap of faith. Abram moved forward in faith, leaving his country. It was not common sense that led him into a foreign place. It was his faith in God. Abram, "believed the Lord." This is a story about trusting in God who does not work in logical ways.

God also promised Abram that he would "go to his ancestors in peace." For me this suggests that there is indeed an afterlife. Although the ancestors are not named, I believe God was referring to the faithful of the past. Noah, would have been one of them. He too took a leap of faith and built an ark. Instead of counting stars, he risked ridicule and had the faith to follow God's instructions. Society thought he was crazy, but he remained faithful.

Noah set out to sea. What did he see at night? He saw millions of stars after the rains had stopped and the sky had cleared. They reminded Noah of God's presence and infinite creative power. The stars would have assured Noah of the same night sky he saw on land. The starlit sky gave him hope and light which enhanced his faith.

Our faith can have both a cosmic and lasting effect on future generations. The

stars that Abram gazed at meant more than just future descendants however. They symbolized the endless ways in which God would work on behalf of the faithful.

Have you ever wondered about the parts of scripture which are left out of the lectionary? Often, the sections left out are "texts of terror" as writer Phyllis Tribble calls them. Sometimes, Biblical characters behave in an unseemly fashion and those narratives are left out of the lectionary. Tamar's rape is not in the lectionary. Ruth's visit to the threshing floor to meet Boaz is not in the lectionary. Sometimes the content is threatening.

So when we come to this passage suggested for the Second Sunday of Lent, you might ask the question: "Why were verses 13-16 left out? And what might those verses say to us if we have the courage to hear them and listen to them?" Abram falls asleep and a deep and terrifying darkness descends upon him. If we can face Abram through the terrifying darkness, maybe we can begin to grasp the possibility that God is present in the terrifying darkness in our lives. Life will not be without trial and difficulties. All of us will face terrifying darkness that can cause us to doubt and question God's promises and presence. Fires will burn in each of our lives and the heat can melt the bravest heart.

That's why I've paired the reading from Genesis with Psalm 27 and the hymns for today. Psalm 27 begins with the words, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" (v. 1).

Each of us, in a way, are, snowflakes, in fact, God's snowflakes — precious, unique and transient — and we need the LORD to preserve us and act as a stronghold for us. Our LORD is the God of the snowflakes. Otherwise, we're going to melt, disappear and be lost forever.

Bible scholar J. Clinton McCann points out that this opening line captures and summarizes the entire psalm, challenging us to make a choice between faith and fear. Either we make the *faith choice*, seeing God as "my light and my salvation," or we make the *fear choice*, looking for the answer to the question, "whom shall I fear?"

As snowflakes, we don't have to go far to find something to fear. We know we're vulnerable to physical illnesses, emotional distresses, relational breakdowns, economic stresses and spiritual crises. Sometimes we feel as delicate and transient as snowflakes — quick to melt down and disappear forever.

But if we make the faith choice, our future looks very different. We aren't so vulnerable if we put our trust in God because we discover that the LORD is our light, our salvation and the stronghold of our life. The key is to put our trust in Almighty God, not in ourselves.

When we live in God's light, we're living in the LORD's presence. God's face often appears as light, or shines upon people, such as in the classic Old Testament blessing, "[T]he LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you" (Numbers 6:25). So when the Lord is our light, we are living close to God and in a place of peace. "Your face, LORD, do I seek," says Psalm 27 a few verses later. "Do not hide your face from me" (vv. 8-9).

Abram made a leap of faith. Whenever we make a leap of faith we are relying on a God who does not always make sense. Just as Abram changed the course of his life based on divine leadership, God wants us to be willing to do the same. God said to Abram, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be great. Look toward Heaven and count the stars.”

What we learn from this story is that sometimes we have to reach for new heights, perhaps re-inventing ourselves, in order to move forward.

Sometimes we refrain from taking leaps of faith because we cannot see the big picture. We are narrowly focused, consumed with our agenda and therefore unable to see the endless possibilities that exist and unwilling to try anything that changes the status quo. It's like being focused on the moon and missing billions of stars. God wanted Abram to reach back and remember. He wants us to remember the illogical, irrational ways that God fulfilled promises and maintained a presence in our lives.

Abram may have discovered inspiration for his faith when he looked at the stars, but it was the experience of God's presence in the reality of Abram's life with his wife, Sarai, bringing new life where there had only been barrenness, that was the miracle.

For what we need to remember, of course, is not just that God exists, not just that beyond the steely brightness of the stars there is a cosmic intelligence of some kind that keeps the whole show going, but that there is a God right here in the thick of our day-by-day lives who may not be writing messages about Himself in the stars, but who in one way or another, is trying to get messages through our blindness as we move around down here knee deep in the fragrant muck and misery and marvel of the world. It is not objective proof of God's existence that we want, but, whether we use religious language for it or not, the experience of God's presence. That is the miracle we are really after. And that is also, I think, the miracle we really get.

But you have to wonder: What does God actually *do* for those who choose faith over fear? Psalm 27 says that God “will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock” (v. 5). This means God will offer protection and deliverance to all who trust in him, keeping them safe from anything that will destroy them.

Challenges will still arise, and crises will come. But God's promise of protection and deliverance means we'll never be completely destroyed by adversity — will never melt and disappear, like a snowflake in the sun.

Faith requires that we be willing to surrender ourselves to God and His will, trusting that God will keep His promises. Abraham's story tells us that faith is less of a leap than it is a single step in a God-ordained direction. If we think we can take that step, then we need to recognize that it won't be easy. If we think we can't take the step of faith, then we need to lean in and listen to God even more closely.

We won't know for sure, however, until we take the first step and the one after that and the one after that and the one after that until, finally, we stand in the presence of God forever and realize that God has been there all along and His promises have all been kept!