

As we continue our readings from the narrative lectionary, please read this week's preaching text, Genesis 15:1-6.

Grace and peace be unto you from God our heavenly Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.

As a city kid for nearly my entire life, to have a really good look at a night sky full of stars I need to literally "get out of town." I sometimes wonder if that might make me appreciate the brilliance of looking at the Milky Way that much more. Anyway, this summer, I was able to go canoeing in the far northern part of Minnesota in the Boundary Waters and my family and I enjoyed one of those skies that can take your breath away. I suppose you know this already but what makes that wide band of milky white in the sky is that we are looking up into the center of our own galaxy with its countless stars.

It would seem that Abraham was invited by God to look into that kind of night sky in our story today. Here in chapter fifteen, Abraham is still being called Abram and apparently, he had begun doubting God's promise that had been given to him back in chapter twelve. As you likely recall, this was a tremendous three-fold promise that God had made with him. A promise of land, of blessing (so that you may be a blessing), and many descendants — "I will make of you a great nation." Now you likely also recall that God made this promise when Abraham and his wife Sarah were 75 years old.

Well, guess what? In order to become the ancestor of a great nation, you need to have at least one child. Now we cannot determine how many years have passed since that promise was made but suffice it to say, time was not making this couple any younger. Now our story begins with the word of the Lord coming to Abram in a vision and he is

told, “Do not be afraid, Abram.” Now while this is a very typical greeting of the divine or an angel to a human, and I am certain it is a terrifying thing to hear the word of the Lord so directly, I cannot help but wonder if this greeting may have missed the mark a bit. Given Abram’s response, it might seem more appropriate for God to tell him, ‘Do not be miffed/frustrated or ticked off, Abram.’ Or maybe, ‘Do not be angry, Abram.’ Or perhaps, ‘Do not feel betrayed.’ Because I would guess that Abram has begun to feel all of these emotions and more.

And who can blame him? God made this monumental promise that changed his life forever — he left his home, his family, and his homeland in response to God’s call and for what? He’s been living in a new, unfamiliar land waiting for the fulfillment of this promise for years... years! So Abram says, “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer... a slave in my house is to be my heir.” Can you picture his frustration? Or perhaps you hear it as desperation? Or is it even resignation? He not only feels the pain of a broken promise but it would seem he believes that God’s promise has not held true. Have any of you been with Abram in this place? It would not surprise me in the least to know some of you are there even today.

Maybe you have felt the pain of infertility. It’s a heavy burden for anyone who experiences it. It can be one of life’s greatest sorrows that most people cannot understand. But having no children in the ancient world was made even worse because one’s children, once they grew to adulthood, were an insurance policy for being cared for in one’s old age. And having children were the also the means by which one’s name lived on. When Abraham and Sarah stepped into God’s promised future, it wasn’t

supposed to look like this — their continued situation made a mockery of their hope, day after day after day.

Maybe the pain of infertility is not something you have experienced but surely we all have places of barrenness and disappointment. Are there parts of your present reality that are keeping you from being able to continue to hope? Abraham and Sarah are specific people from the ancient world but we all have times in our lives when the present reality overwhelms any future hope. “The world as it is” seems to suck all the possibility out of being able to hold out hope in “the world as it should be.”

But into that very place of hopelessness, into what may feel like an endless night, God invites us to go outside into that night and while it is still dark, God speaks of God’s promise once again. “Do not be afraid, I am your shield.” This promise that God says, “I am your shield” is to say that God will be your protector and your deliverer. And God goes on to say to us in our night, while it is still dark, “Look toward heaven and count the stars.”

Luther Seminary Professor Kathryn Schifferdecker provides what I feel is wonderful perspective and insight here by writing, “Outside, under the glory of the endless night sky, Abraham is able to believe what seemed impossible in the close confines of his tent.” What this tells me is that God is more than able and willing to meet us in our place of self-pity or isolation or frustration or deep disappointment and give us an entire new perspective. Many of us will tragically refuse the invitation to leave that place of hopelessness and pain because even as bad as it is, we feel completely

bound by what we know. And so even though it is distorted and not what God intends for us or for our world, we somehow convince ourselves that it is right, and even true.

I believe that this story of Abraham, being called out from under his tent is the story that we are invited to participate in. This story invites us to go outside what we know and hear God's promise once again. To consider God trustworthy. To hold onto the promise despite all evidence to the contrary. To have faith that God can and will do the impossible. In the Biblical story, we know that Abraham and Sarah do have a son and indeed, descendants that will rival the number of stars. And one of those descendants will be Jesus himself who will shine as the Light of the World. And when we believe in Jesus as our Savior; it is that faith that God counts as righteous. Or, put another way, it is that faith that puts each one of us in a right relationship with God; loved, forgiven, and blessed to be a blessing. Amen

Narrative.3 Genesis 15:1-6
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Pastor Jonathan Zielske