

Starry, Starry Night
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The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Genesis 15:1-6

We left the story last week with God expelling Adam and Eve from the Garden after they had reached beyond their God-given limitations. Over the following centuries, we are told that the humans are seeking more and more of their own way, rejecting God over and over again.

God even tries to do a global re-boot with an Ark and a covenant and animals 2x2, but the result is the same - these people that were created from dust, who carry the breath of God in their lungs, continue to wander further and further away from the place and purpose they were created for. How frustrating!

So, the Creator God changes strategy. Instead of working with all of humanity, God chooses one family through whom the connection might be re-established. A man and a woman (and eventually, another woman) whom he can walk with once again. Through this one family, God plans to bless them all.

And so God calls a man named Abram to leave all he has in his homeland of Ur and follow where God will lead. And Abram does, but the way is not easy, nor is the path clear, and he keeps getting himself in all kinds of messes.

There is famine in the land, so Abram heads to Egypt where he deceives Pharaoh about Sarai, his wife, to protect his own skin. When he returns, he encounters conflict with those around him. His nephew Lot is kidnapped, but later rescued. By the time our story today takes place, Abram has become a rather wealthy man, and yet there is something that is still troubling him - worries still on his mind.

The God of Abraham makes some pretty big promises... land, countless faithful descendants who will be a blessing to all the nations of the world... just to name the two most important ones.

But what happens when those dreams are delayed? No kids. No land. Just a vague promise in your back pocket and empty heartache.

That's why Abraham is so disappointed, looking out at the night sky. We know what that feels like, when we're afraid and sad because it feels like everything that has been promised to us is late. As the great Tom Petty was known to sing... "the waiting is the hardest part".

Our first instinct as human beings is to take matters into our own hands, or settle for something less and seek an alternative future. So, Abraham resigns himself that his slave Eliazer will be the one who will eventually inherit his worldly goods. Not that there's anything wrong with that, I'm sure good ole' Eli is a trusted member of the staff, Abraham just wishes he could keep it all in the family. Then Sarah arranges to become a mother via a surrogate arrangement with her slave, Hagar.

Perhaps being righteous has nothing to do with a lack of virtue or morality, but everything to do with how we handle promises and trust: Do we do it the right way, and trust the promises of God, accepting the outcome of the moment, or do we take a shortcut and hope for the best?

I can relate to wanting to find a shortcut right now. Like many of you, I am tired of making decisions about everyday things that shouldn't be a big deal. It's like there's this big Phantom Menace out there, forcing me to make hard choices where everything is a balance of risk and reward. Every decision that we try to make seems like a life and death one! The pressure is weighing on all of us, in one manner or another. It's called "Decision Fatigue", and it's heavy, friends.

But the truth is that we can't skip ahead any more than Abraham could. The facts on the ground after that starry, starry night remained unchanged. Still no kid. No land. Just more waiting. There were no proofs, either. Or, even signs really. Just a Bedouin longing for a better future... we see the same scene around the world every day.

God does not shame Abraham for his questioning, nor rebuke his anger at God's seeming faithlessness. God simply calls him forth again from the confines of his tent to look at the wide and sparkling sky above. God waits patiently as he counts each twinkle, and when he eventually loses track and gives up counting, God renews the promise: "So shall your descendants be."

It's Abraham's choice to accept the promise God has in store. And the choice he makes is not about privilege or maintaining power; it's about responsibility, which is the beginning of covenant.

God's challenge to count the stars is not an exercise in science or math, although some have tried it. Seventy sextillion (that's 7 followed by 22 zeros) is the latest count, according to star gazers at the Australian National University¹. They claim this is ten times as many stars as grains of sand on all the world's beaches and deserts. And Aussies should know; they have plenty of both.

Abraham's faith is renewed because God opens space for his grief, as he attempts the impossible counting of stars, then speaks the promise again when Abraham has nothing left to say. The text calls this moment righteousness, in Hebrew, *sedaka*... which might be better translated as being in healthy, right relationship... and whether that is because Abraham has believed God's word or that God has listened, held and honored an old man's grief is yet to be determined... both God and Abraham have done right by each other.

What a brilliant preview of what Abrahamic promise-trusters will come to be: "a light to those who are in darkness," repeated in the sacred text as Christ's charge to those of us who follow him, "Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your father in heaven."

So when promise-trusters do their job and give witness to the Light, we become lights through words and sacramental acts and care and service – even when our usual ways of doing so get disrupted and we struggle. And that completes the promise... not just the one centered on descendants and land that were Abraham's primary concern, but rather, the blessing that is God's ultimate end goal: "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

And so, we current day promise-trusters, drawn into this church community, also look to the future, standing on the side of God's will for a just, secure, and more peaceful world. Knowing that even if these hopes are not completely realized in our lifetimes, they will be fulfilled in God's own time. And when we get anxious, we too can go out and look at the sky, and remember where to place our trust. Amen.

¹ CNN.com on 7/22/2003