

# “Like the Stars in Heaven”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – September 20, 2020*

16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 46:1-3, 8-11

Rev. John Wahl

Genesis 15:1-6

It has been noted by people smarter than I that legal and judicial trailblazer Ruth Bader Ginsburg – the first Jewish woman to serve on the Supreme Court – died on Rosh Hashanah, the celebration of the Jewish New Year. Hers is a legacy of new beginnings; an amazing woman who fought to break down barriers to human rights, equality, and new opportunities.

In the Jewish faith, legacy is important. Lacking certain belief in an afterlife, the ancient Hebrews believed that lives would be remembered beyond death based on what was left behind. In Abraham’s case, his concern for legacy took the form of an heir; someone who could carry on the family name and traditions. As an old man, leader of his clan but – to this point – childless, his anxiety about his legacy is here on full display.

Of course, this is not the first time that God has appeared to Abraham. Back in chapter 12, Abraham receives a three-fold promise of land, material blessing, and many descendants. It is this last part of the promise that is especially difficult to believe. It is impossible to be the ancestor of a “great nation” if you don’t even have one child: Abraham and his wife Sarah have none.

In the first eleven chapters of Genesis, the scope for God’s action is the whole world. All of creation (including but not limited to humanity) is declared to be good. As a result of human sin and violence, though, God generates a flood to cleanse the earth; using Noah, his family, and the representative animals to connect past to future. But, beginning in chapter 12, the story arc moves away from the wide perspective of the whole world, and zooms in on Abraham and his family. Instead of focusing on the sin and violence of all humanity, and instead of trying to work blessing for the world, God takes a new approach: working through particular individuals to bless all the families of the earth. It is a decision by God to enact universal blessing through the specific: a strange idea that sounds strange to many modern people, but one that God will repeat in the incarnation of Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jacqueline Lapsley from *WorkingPreacher.com*

The first thing that Abraham is told by God is not to fear, that God will be his shield; words that might have been more reassuring after Abraham had, in the previous chapter, been involved in a battle to rescue his nephew Lot. God also says that Abraham's reward (literally his "wages") will be great. His material wealth has been increasing since chapter 12, but Abraham is being reminded here that God is his true reward.

And yet, Abraham seems more focused on the other parts of the promise that remain unfulfilled. His complaint is in two parts. The first is: "O Lord God, what will you give me, seeing that I continue to be childless and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" – his servant. His words make it clear that it is not just the absence of a child that is on his mind; Abraham is also thinking about his death. Implicit in his words is the fact that he views anything that God might give him will go to waste because he has no offspring to inherit these gifts. When God does not immediately reply to this first statement of dissatisfaction, Abraham goes on and is more direct in his speech, saying "Look, you have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is my heir."

Another, simpler paraphrase for Abraham's question in verse 2 is, "Really?" That question could be expressed in a tone of disbelief, or genuine curiosity, or some mixture of the two. God has promised descendants, but they have yet to become reality; so, perhaps, Abraham is asking, *What will you give me? Is my reward to be something other than children?*<sup>2</sup>

Why does God show up at this point to reassure Abraham? Nothing has really changed during the interval since the promise was originally made other than time has passed. Abraham and Sarah are not getting any younger and the anxiety that their lives are nearing an end without an heir – without a legacy – is only growing. Somehow, God must have understood this worry and sought to intervene. The answer is not yet anything tangible; but at least a narrowing of the promise: Abraham's heir will not be a slave but instead "one of your very own."

In addition to this reiteration of the promise, and this piece of new information, God takes Abraham outside of his tent and asks him to look up at the heavens. The stars in the night sky serve as a symbol of the promise made; Abraham's descendants will be as numerous as the stars overhead. And we're told, in the section's final verse, that Abraham believed; that, in spite of his doubts and fear, he trusted God's promise.

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<sup>2</sup> Sara Koenig from *WorkingPreacher.com*

We know, of course, that this promise is eventually fulfilled. Abraham will have two sons: first Ishmael and then Isaac. The number of stars in the sky is a long-term promise; that over many generations, his descendants will indeed be numerous. But for Abraham, his doubt is transformed by belief; something that God “reckoned to him as righteousness.”

To a southerner like me, to “reckon” is to give a squishy promise; as in, *I reckon I’ll get the grass cut today if I have time*. But for God, this reckoning means something more. God sees that Abraham has decided to believe in the promise – to move forward with the expectation that it is going to be fulfilled – despite having nothing more than the sign of the stars in the sky to give reassurance to his doubts. Abraham gets credit for his belief; and is reassured that when we have anxiety about the future, it is okay to share those fears with God.<sup>3</sup>

So what about our own hopes and fears – what promises do we sometimes have trouble trusting? Where are our own places of barrenness and disappointment? What present realities keep us from being able to maintain hope? In the midst of this global pandemic, rampant natural disasters, economic uncertainties and political divisions, do we trust our relationship with God enough to openly share our worries? Present reality has a way of overwhelming future hope, and the promises of God too often seem to remain just that, promises. As one pastor observes, “God is often subtle to a fault.”<sup>4</sup>

One of the most difficult things about faith is that it requires a level of patience and persistence that does not come naturally to us. Something in our human nature leads us to worry and doubt. This interchange between Abraham and God does not underestimate the effort that is involved in living a life of faith, but it does suggest that honesty and imagination are two keys to living such a life. Generations before us have also declare that a life of faith is difficult but is, ultimately, the most satisfying way to live; these many generations have born witness to the faithfulness of God, even in the midst of anxiety and fear. God reckons our belief, despite the doubts and uncertainties, as righteousness – an account we can draw from.

We live in the tension between the way things are and the way we think they should be. The gospel has been defined as God’s good news for our bad situations. Sometimes bad situations are the result of our sinfulness and violence, but our bad situations instead often involve health issues, troubled relationships, or feelings of lacking purpose or legacy. This passage from Genesis recognizes that it can be

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<sup>3</sup> Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, Jr., *Bibleworm Podcast*

<sup>4</sup> Kathryn Schiffendecker from *WorkingPreacher.com*

hard to believe when we are in the midst of bad situations. But God addresses these moments with promises that address our needs. Just as God reiterated and clarified the promises made to Abraham and Sarah, God demonstrates to us that his news for us is indeed good; that God is willing to intervene in particular ways so that we might believe.

Outside, under the glory of the starry, night sky, Abraham is able to believe what seemed impossible within the confines of his tent. The God who created the heavens and scattered the stars across the sky is the same God who promises him that he will have a son and descendants to rival the number of the stars. Abraham believes God; he holds onto the promises made despite all evidence to the contrary. And that is the faith that God counts as righteousness.

We, too, can't see how everything is going to play out. We don't know how long this pandemic will last, or when the fires and floods in the West and South might subside, or what might lead our nation to heal its divisions. Still, we can live with the anxieties of the moment; trusting that the day of God's peaceful kingdom is coming. Abraham is comforted without being told the details of how the promise will be fulfilled. Seeing the stars at night was enough for him to trust the word of the Lord.

Each of us has worries about our legacy; we want to believe that our lives will leave a lasting accomplishment; whether that is through children or not. God is the one who remembers all that is otherwise forgotten. Nothing is therefore lost; God looks upon our faith – even when we freely and truthfully express our doubts – and reckons it as righteousness. All our thanks and praise to God. Amen.