

“Look Up”ⁱ

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Genesis 15:1-2, 4-6, 18

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?”

But the word of the LORD came to him, “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.” God brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then the LORD said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates,

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. Therefore, my sisters and brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

I’m not an artist. But I have, on occasion, substitute taught middle school art classes. One of those lessons was about perspective. If I put a dot on the horizon and draw all manner of lines leading to that dot, I create the illusion of perspective.

If I draw two lines, I create a path. But if I remove parts of the lines, where is the path? It’s as if it’s lost in fog.

Abram is lost in fog. Oh, he can see what’s right in front of him, but he cannot see further than that. God has promised him a son and a home but all these years later Abram cannot see how these promises can possibly be fulfilled.

Up until this point, Abram has unquestioningly done everything God has asked of him. He left his homeland and family, travelled, and travelled some more, all the while following God’s promises like a path of blessing.

Now, in chapter 15 of Genesis, Abram begins to question whether the land and children will ever come to be. He cries out in complaint. The future looms ahead, like a foggy night, dark and empty. And into this apparent void, God whispers, “Look up!”

One septillion, that’s a 1 with 24 zeros after it. This is a very rough estimate of how many stars there are, according to David Kornreich, founder of the “Ask An Astronomer” service at Cornell

University.ⁱⁱ I can't begin to grasp that number. Can you?

Today, we turn our gaze upward and outward. In this Lenten season, we turn again toward God, the source of our promises and our dreams.

The sky seems to be made for stargazing. Can you recall a moment of wonder – maybe recently, maybe in childhood – when you marveled at the night sky? In Girl Scouts we learned to identify the simplest constellations but it was in New Mexico – when the sky seemed closer – that I really came to appreciate the fullness and depth of the stars.

Since the earliest times, people have looked to the sky for answers to their questions. Scientists and mystics have noted changes in the night sky with awe and curiosity or, sometimes, with fear.

If the sky is made for stargazing, humans are meant for doing it. By looking up at the night sky, maybe they would find their place in the big picture. Maybe if they if they could understand this one thing, then all the rest would fall into place. And life would make sense.

When we look to the night sky, we see the same stars that Abram saw when he dared to ask God his toughest questions. The same stars that led the magi to search for a new king who would free his people. We see the same stars that led the psalmist to write that God has a name for each of them (147:4). The stars seem nearly immortal.

Yet, what happens when God – or God's promises – seem as distant as those stars?

We have been praying our BTP since last summer, asking God to lead us into God's great new thing. We have been opening our attention and noticing personal breakthroughs – like a lost child found, a car crash averted, or sobriety – and we have seen community breakthroughs – like squealing preschoolers playing in the Fellowship Hall, new energy, and fresh ideas for reaching out to our neighbors. We are so fortunate to have been chosen to be a part of this MCCI resourcing and to learn about BTP, GGG, triads and other tools to help First Church assess and grow in our health and vitality

Yet, if we are going to be honest, there are prayers that seem not to have been answered. Many of you have been praying for your One Big Thing for a very long time. We wait and watch, and sometimes sink into anger or despair.

We lament when the worldwide UMC takes a stand that we cannot support. We rebel when our own church moves in directions that make us uncomfortable. We mentally shake our fists when the friend we pray for dies. We grieve when our independence become dependence. We wonder why things are so wrong when someone loses their job or their home, when the lonely pray to no avail for companionship, or when parents pray in vain to have a child.

My son Jared told me in December that he and Tiny had to discontinue their health insurance for 2019. They could not afford it. They are both young and healthy but he was clearly frightened. How will this turn out? We don't know.

Like a dark fog, we cannot know what's ahead. The path to the future is obscured. Into this seeming void, God whispers. And we look up.

God's promise to Abram seems far away. As distant as the stars. Abram has been so faithful, so solid. He longs for a child and a place to call home. Surely it's time... isn't it?

What is your prayer? What have you faithfully been asking God for, for, oh, so long? While the beauty of the night sky is undeniable, there comes a point when star-gazing seems not to be

enough. Abram has lived in faith for decades, but now the fulfillment of God's promises seems unlikely. And, the questions and the fear have set in.

In our Philippians lesson this morning, the apostle Paul calls his readers to imitate him and to follow the example set by him and his companions. Our Genesis reading is not this obvious in its invitation. Yet, here too we find an example worthy of imitation.

For Abram is walking the archetypal human journey of faithfulness in God. When we are grounded in our faith at the beginning of our journey, we too trust in God's promises. As we continue our journey, if those promises don't seem to come any nearer, we begin to question – our faith and God's faithfulness. We question the possibility of our dreams and the fear that we were wrong to trust in the first place.

This is a painful place to be, stumbling along on a path we cannot see or blinking back tears at dreams deferred. And yet, this experience marks the beginning of Abram's greatest growth in faithfulness. This is precisely the experience that catalyzes our faith development! Abram laments. He questions. And through his questioning, he learns to trust again.

Some of us were taught not to question God, yet Abram, this man who is held up as a paragon of faithfulness, does question God. Other times, he pleads or argues with God. Through his questioning and through their ongoing dialog, God continues to shape Abram, helping him to grow in faith, leading him to stretch beyond what he was into what God knows he can be.

As followers of Christ, we are called to a similar transformation. All our lives, but maybe more so during Lent, we are invited to allow God to shape us and to be co-creators with God in our own transformation.

As a congregation but also as individuals, we are called to pray. We believe in the power of prayer. We believe that God is eager for our participation in God's vision for our communities and for First Church. And so we pray – alone and together – our BTP, our private and our community prayers. And our prayers are sometimes angry or demanding.

When we imitate Abram, we stand in good company. When we question or impatiently call to see God's action, to find proof of God's promises kept, we are practicing deeper faithfulness. We may feel, oh, so fragile, laying our unrealized hopes and dreams before the Almighty. We may quake in our beds as we think of it. Yet, we too are called to count the stars if we can. We are invited, like Abram, to travel our own wilderness, and to grow from that experience.

We will discover that our plans are not God's plans. What today's text leaves out is the part saying that before God's promise is fulfilled, Abram will live through more struggle and hardship. We would like to skip over this in our lives as easily as we skip those verses in the Bible.

It can be so hard to keep on trusting and following God through unfamiliar or unpleasant territory. Yet this is what the season of Lent is all about. We accept the invitation to wander our own wilderness, asking our own tough questions. And through the experience, we learn again to trust our steps to God's path for us.

Today we are reminded to imitate those who have travelled this path before us. We are reminded that doubt is a fine step on the way to greater faith.

Our God, through Christ, is our guiding star amidst the septillion other stars. If you are wandering through your own wilderness, look up. Count the stars, if you can. And remind

yourself that just as God walked with Abram through his journey – including, maybe especially, his time of doubts and questions, God walks with you as well.

ⁱ For this sermon, I borrowed freely from “Second Sunday in Lent 2019, Year C: With All Your Heart: IMITATING,” for March 17, umcdiscipleship.org/worship/lectionary-calendar

ⁱⁱ “How Many Stars Are There In the Universe” Howell, Elizabeth. May 17, 2017 <https://www.space.com/26078-how-many-stars-are-there.html>