

## “STARGAZING”

Becky Stephens

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent

**Text: Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18**

### **Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18**

*15 Sometime later, the LORD spoke to Abram in a vision and said to him, “Do not be afraid, Abram, for I will protect you, and your reward will be great.”*

*2 But Abram replied, “O Sovereign LORD, what good are all your blessings when I don’t even have a son? Since you’ve given me no children, Eliezer of Damascus, a servant in my household, will inherit all my wealth. 3 You have given me no descendants of my own, so one of my servants will be my heir.”*

*4 Then the LORD said to him, “No, your servant will not be your heir, for you will have a son of your own who will be your heir.” 5 Then the LORD took Abram outside and said to him, “Look up into the sky and count the stars if you can. That’s how many descendants you will have!”*

*6 And Abram believed the LORD, and the LORD counted him as righteous because of his faith.*

*7 Then the LORD told him, “I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land as your possession.”*

*8 But Abram replied, “O Sovereign LORD, how can I be sure that I will actually possess it?”*

*9 The LORD told him, “Bring me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” 10 So Abram presented all these to him and killed them. Then he cut each animal down the middle and laid the halves side by side; he did not, however, cut the birds in half. 11 Some vultures swooped down to eat the carcasses, but Abram chased them away.*

*12 As the sun was going down, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a terrifying darkness came down over him.*

*17 After the sun went down and darkness fell, Abram saw a smoking firepot and a flaming torch pass between the halves of the carcasses. 18 So the Lord made a covenant with Abram that day and said, "I have given this land to your descendants, all the way from the border of Egypt to the great Euphrates River—*

1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000. One septillion in the American counting system, 1 quadrillion in the European—it's just a rough estimate of just how many stars there might be. It's probably a gross *underestimate*. The simple question that asks how many stars are in existence baffles even the most astute 21<sup>st</sup> century scientific minds, let alone one man in antiquity having a conversation with God under the night sky.

Last week, we looked to the land, the tilled earth, and the fruits that came from it, to ground us in our journey toward the heart of God in this Lenten season. We encountered a promise of story, identity, and at last, celebration, as we remembered who and whose we are—we are children of God, and we belong to God.

This week, we turn our gaze upward, aspiring to imitate our Creator, the source of our promise, our dreams and our guiding star along our Lenten pathway.

Just as far as the stars are from us, God's promise seems very far off from Abram. Abram yearns for something closer and more concrete—the solid weight of a newborn heir in his arms or the firm ground beneath his feet in a place he could finally call home. Maybe star-gazing wasn't enough for this paragon of faith. Maybe, with Abram, we know we are in good company when we question and impatiently demand that we see proof of God's promises kept.

Humans are meant for stargazing. From the earliest civilizations, humanity tended to look to the sky for answers to all sorts of questions. My family are firm believers in gardening and planting by the "signs." People have marked celestial movements with great enthusiasm, and sometimes, with great fear. Maybe if they looked up at the night sky, they would find their place in the

grand scheme of things. Or maybe they believed that if they understood this **one thing**, then all the rest of their questions would melt away. Life would make sense. The orderly beauty of the night sky is undeniable. It is like a living dream.

When we look up at the night sky, we see the same stars that Abram did that night that he asked tough questions of God, the same stars that the magi did as they read the sky in search of a new king who would free his people, the same stars that made the psalmist break out in song and claim that God had a name for each one of them (Ps 147:4).

What happens, though, when God and God's promises seem as distant as the stars themselves? What happens when a family who has prayed for years for a child asks with Abram, *"O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless?"* What happens when someone loses a house, a job, health care, and in the struggle to survive, asks: *"O Lord, God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?"* The answers seem elusive in the world in which we live. This room is full of people who are waiting in the dark for urgent prayers to be answered and God's promise to come into fruition. How do we keep faith burning brightly in our hearts when the stars that are meant to guide us grow dim and cold?

Until this moment in Genesis, Abram has unquestioningly done everything that God had asked of him. He left his homeland, built some altars, made some bad decisions, parted from some of his family, all the while following God's promises of land and descendants like a trail of blessings. As chapter 15 opens, however, Abram has begun to question whether this promise of land and offspring will ever come to pass. It appears Abram is willing to have faith up to a point, then fulfillment of the promises of God become impossible—at least in his eyes. That is precisely when the questions, confusion, fear, and obstinance set in.

Abram is walking the quintessential human journey of faithfulness in God. If we are grounded in our faith when we begin our journey, we too trust in the promises of God. If we keep walking on our journey and those promises don't seem to be any nearer, then we start questioning—our own faith, God's faithfulness, the possibility of our dreams, the hurt of human suffering, the fear

that we were wrong to trust in the first place. It is a painful place to be, sitting on the ground and staring up at a sky that seems as far away as we can imagine.

It is precisely this experience that is a catalyst for our growth in faithfulness, as it was Abram's. It is in the questioning that Abram learns to trust again. Lent, as we know, is a transformation of the heart. Question by question, Abram's heart is being shaped into a more trusting form. Maybe this is true for us, as well. Maybe we are being transformed and shaped as we explore our own wildernesses and dreams and count the stars. Our hearts are just as pliable (and fragile) as Abram's.

Abram sets a familiar pattern for Lent and our cycle of faith, doubt and finally trust. What our Scripture for today leaves out is the part of Abram's dream that says before God's promises will be fulfilled (and they will because God always keeps God's promises), there will be a time of struggle and hardship. We tend to want to skip over that piece. Four hundred years is a long time to keep trusting, keep moving, keep following God through a land that is not our own. But this is what this long season of Lent is about. We are given time in the wilderness to ask the tough questions and learn to trust our heart to God's heart, our steps to God's pathway. The way may be long and winding, but the God who set the stars in motion will guide us on our journey. And just maybe the next time that we look up at the septillion stars, we might trust that God has put just one there so that we might find our way home.

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In your bulletin, you have an insert of a yellow star. I want to invite you, if you will, to take a moment and write down the prayers and promises that you are waiting for from God. You don't have to sign it. In a moment, we are going to pray over these stars. During our closing hymn, I invite you to bring them down and place them on the altar. In doing so, we are growing in our faithfulness—trusting our heart to God's heart, our steps to God's pathway.