

*Seeing Stars, Genesis 15:1-6 (16 Sept 18)*

As one facing childlessness, this reading of Abram feels burdensome to me. Why no child, God? God clarifies and repeats a promise. But, I have to ask, how does Abram encounter that promise and what actually is God's promise today?

We're beginning a second year of the Narrative Lectionary for Bible readings. Last week, we heard generally about earth and generic earthlings. Now the story takes a very different turn, from a broad statement of all creation and all humankind to this particular story, one person instead of the whole human family, one individual leading to universal benefit.

In a significant way, this is the start of our story, past the background stuff. (Though we might make the same point when we get into Exodus in a couple weeks. Or you probably even feel more that way when we get to Jesus and the New Testament in December.)

Still, for origins, you might know that the three great monotheistic religions trace back to Abram, whose relationship to God has been formative to Christians and Jews and Muslims, even as we emphasize and understand that differently. With over 4 billion combined adherents, over half of the world's population, that is a big number.

But it feels hasty and unsatisfying to chalk that up as if God can hang up a "mission accomplished" banner after four millennia and say that the spiritual heirs of Abram have now spread out like the dust of the earth.

For one thing, it doesn't address my own personal concern. Nor does it address Abram's, which is the point of hearing and living again into this story.

To know the fuller narrative, Abram first appeared at the end of chapter 11. Barely has his family tree been named when we're discovering it's going to end up a stump. Four verses after he's introduced, we're told he's unlikely to have any children, and not just because he's already 75 years old.

But by the start of chapter 12, God is making promises to Abram, and keeps reiterating them, about the heritage for Abram's offspring. Eight times in the following chapters, God voices reassurance of making good on this promise, even when everything seems directly to contradict it.

Now, for Abram the issue was different from how I consider it. For Abram and his time, a child meant life by offering necessary support in old age, that culture's kind of social security. Descendants were also their version of eternal life—not that I personally would continue to exist, but that something of him would live on in future successors. This is also how God's work would proceed, through the course of family generations and on in the Bible's story.

But if the first problem was that this promise seems absurdly impossible, then a second problem is that it's awfully gradual. We're already three chapters along at today's passage, and God is reiterating the promise a third time, and Abram is having to protest, to question, to raise his doubts: *Hey God, you keep talking about this, but (in case you hadn't noticed) I don't have a lone child, much less plural like the sands of the beach. Right now my hired help is the closest thing I've got, and that doesn't sound like what you keep yakking about.*

This chapter reinforces that God will be responsible for making it happen, but it doesn't move any closer to fulfillment. In the next chapter and eleven years later, Abram does have a child, but this won't be the one who counts for the promise. It's another thirteen years when Abram is 99 years old before Isaac is born, a name that means "he laughs." It almost seems that the laughter wouldn't be about joyful birth, but a disbelieving scoff that it actually happened, or even a sarcastic chuckle from God, smirking "see, I told you so."

Abram continues mostly as the focus until he's laid to rest in chapter 25, then remains the bedrock or roots or seed of this whole story. For the rest of the Bible, one of God's main identifiers will be "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," the first three generations of this myriad.

So there's the sweep, but still, for the particularity today: even as God repeats promises, Abram doubts. We shouldn't picture a patiently persevering patriarch of the faith. It's not that he can stifle his concerns and assume God will work it out in God's good time. It's not that he has the self-confidence and fortitude to take matters into his own hands.

Perhaps, hear this passage with resounding grinding disappointment. Hear it as one who can only see literal dead ends, who simply doesn't believe it can be possible. Hear it in the peculiar phrase Paul uses for Abram much later in Scripture, that he could only "hope against hope" (Romans 4). Hear it as prayer with nowhere else to turn. And maybe it's fitting that Abram ends up looking up at the night sky, because he's sure stuck out in the dark.

These are horribly hard moments when even the littlest things seem like an impossibility, when anything is too much to hope. It's not just Abram. It's life's immobilization. That no matter how hard I try, it won't work out. Things just don't go how you want. That we don't know what to do, so why bother. That progress is preposterous.

In such moments, I need to compliment Abram for voicing his grievance. I mostly end up wordless, with my head in my hands, tears in my eyes, staring out the window and unsure not only what I could do about it, but unsure of my very self. Abram at least can argue with God and not let a bland platitude pretend to be a promise. He won't stand for God saying, *Oh, Abe, Don't worry. Everything's gonna be alright. It'll work out.*

Abram's objection meets God's exact identity: God always keeps God's promises. And so it is good to know those promises. God clarifies and repeats. And God clarifies and repeats. And clarifies and repeats. Because we need to keep hearing it, especially when it is incredible, unbelievable, too good to be true, more than we can hope.

Still, I can't but wonder if God goes a little overboard this time, telling Abram to go out and count the stars. When Abram is concerned about

having no children, this is a ridiculous reply, a depiction reinforcing how outlandish God's promise is. I gave it a shot this week on a clear evening. From my house, even with city lights and trees in the way, I could count 68 stars, plus two planets and an airplane. Setting aside if the extra planets and plane might mean a couple pet dogs and an aardvark, 68 stars says 68 offspring promised to a guy who had none. Figuring that Abram didn't have to deal with light pollution, around 4500 stars are visible to the naked eye in a night sky. Or we might take the 100 billion stars in our Milky Way galaxy. Or maybe God intended a full insight into the septillion or so stars in the universe. Clearly ludicrous to be transferable to God's promise.

So does Abram take this as good news? Pretty much every commentary I read found encouragement for old Abe, that he had a nightly verification of what was in store. That's optimistic analysis. From the shoes of a doubter, I wonder if he was feeling his nose rubbed in it. For 24 years, a nightly reinforcement that not only didn't he have innumerable progeny, but had zilch. So is God sufficient? Abram seems assuaged by the end of the passage. How about you?

I admit this is a weird way to start this year of the Narrative Lectionary, and a weird way for the Bible's story to get going. It certainly doesn't mesh with instant gratification or our analytical minds looking for proofs and verification. We want results and we want them now. This isn't satisfying. For all the confident reassurances, it doesn't exactly feel very confidently reassuring. I admit that, while refusing to let God's Word become a little pep talk so that you can go back out there from the sidelines and feel better. Maybe we do celebrate the eventuality of abundant goodness.

But for the most part, we have to recognize that all we've got is the promise. Faith. Trust. This is a desperate hope, a blind confidence, believing without seeing. This is a God who offers you the stars as reminder with diddly squat as factual evidence. This is a God in Jesus who says that his presence with you and everlasting life for

you is in a bite of bread that's gone long before you get back to your seat, much less feeling very tangible when you go back out to face fears and real doubts in these hard days. This is a God who continues to accept your concerns and frustrations and wonderings, who fully knows your struggles and sorrows and yet decides to work within those limitations and to reiterate goodness for you. God clarifies and repeats. Clarifies and repeats.

So what is this promise? Abram was supposed to go out and look at the stars and think about having children. But I can't claim that applies from God to me. I can go out and look at the stars as a reminder that God keeps God's promises. That ultimate promise is life. And God refuses to have that interrupted or disturbed by any circumstance, by your place in the generations, by foolishness or old age, by family trees or stumps, by lightyears of distance and continuums of spacetime, by apparent impossibilities, by our dim understandings, by doubts or disagreements, dead ends or even death, a promise of life that can't be beaten by hurricane forces or rigid oppressions or sad endings, by the too-slow turn of history, or even by the too common Monday morning blues and frustrations of the week. That is the promise of life from God that Abram came to count on and is for me, for you to hear and hold and maybe deem right. And so again God clarifies and repeats.