

*“Count the Stars, if you are able...”*

*Meditation on Genesis 15*

*Feb. 21, 2016*

*Merritt Island Presbyterian Church*

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*“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?’ And Abram said, ‘You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.’ 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.’ He brought him outside and said, ‘Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’ And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.*

*“Then he said to him, ‘I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.’ But he said, ‘O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?’ He said to him, ‘Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtle-dove, and a young pigeon.’ He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.*

*“When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire-pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. 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.’”*

My friend, Lynn Miller, from Minnesota visited this week. She came to speak during our Tuesday night Lenten worship as a volunteer from the Friends of the Presbyterian Education Board of Pakistan. The group reaches out with compassion to some of the poorest families in the mostly Muslim nation. The Friends group provides scholarships and funds to build, repair and update the Presbyterian schools in Pakistan, founded by missionaries about 150 years ago. Because of the work of the Friends group and the P.E.B., poor, rural and minority children in Pakistan--many of whom are Christian--have educational opportunities not normally open to them.

During Lynn's stay with us, we learned that she had studied French in college and had hoped to travel the world as a flight attendant, but TWA and Pan Am didn't call; Michelin Tire did. She often wondered what would have happened **if** she had become a flight attendant--her dream career. Her administrative experience and people skills came in handy when she became involved with the Friends of the P.E.B. through her home church. Lynn's job is to handle the scholarship piece, connecting donors with needy students. But she is also a donor, providing scholarships each year for two Pakistani children. She was able to meet the two children--sisters- and their parents during her visit to Pakistan in November. Their education will provide them with choices, other than getting married at a young age, living in almost certain poverty, and giving birth to many children.

Lynn asked about my story. I shared how I felt called to leave a challenging, interesting career as a religion journalist to go to seminary and how it was hard because I knew who I was when I was a

journalist--and I liked who I was. I had always wanted to be a writer! When I went to seminary, my identity and my future were suddenly uncertain. I remember my own brokenness and daily struggle to fully trust the Lord, to surrender all my doubts, fears, hopes and dreams to Him.

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Abram, in Genesis 15, is also struggling to trust the Lord, when the Lord gives him a vision. The first words, "After these things" connect us to earlier events. Abram's story begins in Gen. 12, with the first time Abram, at age 75, hears God's voice, telling him to leave Ur, the place of his birth, his family and his father's house, and go to a land that God would show him. The promise is that God will make him a great nation, that God will be with him and bless him with land and children, and that he will be a blessing to all the families of the earth. The problem is that Abram and his beautiful wife, Sarai, are not young and Sarai has been unable to have children. But Abram hears God, believes God, and leaves his homeland with his wife and nephew, Lot, without question. They go to Canaan, where the Lord appears and says he will give the land to Abram's offspring. Abram doesn't question this gift; he builds an altar and "invokes the name of the Lord"--he prays. Then, when famine forces Abram and Sarai to move to Egypt and Abram gets scared and passes Sarai off as his sister, the Lord watches over them and prospers them, despite Abram's fearful deception. God's provision and protection continues and Lot and Abram become wealthy and

separate when there is strife between the herders of their livestock. Lot moves to Sodom. Then, Sodom is attacked and Lot, his people and his goods are taken away, but God strengthens Abram to raise up an army and rescue Lot. Afterward, Melchizedek, the king and priest, blesses him. And Abram, grateful for what God has done, gives the Lord one-tenth of everything he has received.

But then we begin Gen. 15, and the scene is drastically changed. Where is the confident man, the brave warrior that Abram was in chapter 14? Years have passed; Sarai and Abram have grown even older, and still, no children! For the first time since he first heard God's voice, Abram is struggling to believe in God's promises. So the Lord speaks to Abram in a vision, assuring him that he need not be afraid, that he is his "shield"--ancient language of protection that we also find in the Psalms. God promises him a great reward--but this is a gift of grace, for certainly Abram has done nothing to deserve it! And now, also for the first time in Abram's story, the elderly man responds to God, pouring out his doubts and fears. He says, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless? And now the heir of my house is not my own child, but Eliezer of Damascus... You have given me NO offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir."

Will God punish Abram for his questioning, for his lack of faith? No, God doesn't punish or even scold Abram. He reassures him. His heir *will* be his own child--and this is my favorite part. God "brings" Abram outside. We can imagine the scene.. that he was in his tent, probably lying down, when the vision roused him from sleep, as we discover, in verse 5, that this vision is *at night*. For the Lord God says, "Look

toward heaven and count the *stars* if you are able to count them.” God is saying, “Don’t look down at your own situation. You are being consumed by what you don’t have! And don’t look back at the past and your disappointment of my promises not yet fulfilled! Look up and **remember who I am**--that I am the Creator of the heavens and the earth--the one who made even you!” There is a pause written into the text, as we imagine Abram gazing up, in awe, at the starry night sky, and we read, “*Then* he said to him, ‘So **shall** your descendants be.’”

And, “Abram believed the Lord,” says verse 6, “and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.” God declares Abram righteous because he believes in God’s promises to him. Then God reminds Abram what he has done for him and that this promise isn’t just about the one child that Abram and Sarai so desperately want; God has a MUCH bigger plan, involving a future nation. “I am the Lord,” God says, “who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans to *give you this land to possess.*”

But then, Abram has more questions. He believes, but he wants to know *more*. In verse 8, we read, “*But he said, ‘O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?’*” Abram wants a sign!

God complies with a sign of the promise that is frankly nothing like the breathtaking, starry night sky or the beautiful rainbow that Noah sees after the flood. Abram descends into a deep sleep, a “deep and *terrifying* darkness” and a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch pass between” the pieces of his sacrificed animals, sealing the covenant the Lord made with Abram, saying, “To your descendants I give this land...”

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I wish I could say that after the vision of chapter 15 that Abram had no more doubts that God would keep his promises and that Abram was patient, waiting for God's promises to be fulfilled. But he did. And he wasn't. In chapter 16, when Sarai still has not born Abram any children and he is 85 years old, Sarai talks him into sleeping with her Egyptian slave, Hagar, so that Sarai may "obtain children by her." It's a cruel mistake that hurts everyone involved.

But God doesn't give up on Abram; his promises of not just a child but a nation, and a blessing for every family on the earth, does come to pass, beginning with a son named Isaac, and, centuries later, the birth of the Messiah for all people, Jesus Christ.

All of our stories are something like Abram's story! Every one of us is called to listen for God's voice, to try to figure out God's will for our lives, and try our best to obey. We are all called to follow in Jesus's footsteps and live humbly for Him. But it's not easy to trust the Lord when God's promises don't seem to match the so-called "reality" of our situations. We may struggle daily with doubts, fears, and impatience, while all the time, God is still with us and still our "shield"--our protection and guide, as he was for Abram.

May you take from Abram's story not his failure to believe, for Abram is remembered as the patriarch with a rock-solid faith, which God "reckoned to him as righteousness." May you remember, instead, that God doesn't give up on us! And that wrestling with doubts and

fears, and pouring them out before God, seeking God's mercy and grace, is *what it means to walk* this journey of faith!

I leave you now with the reassurance of the good future God has planned for us. Don't be consumed by what you want--and don't have! Don't wallow in the disappointments of the past! Look up and **remember who God is!** The creator of heaven and earth--the one who lovingly made you and me! The one whose grace IS enough!

"Look toward heaven and count the *stars*, if you are able to count them...*So shall* your descendants be!"

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, thank you for your Word that reassures us of your promises and our good future as your people, a people of hope! Thank you for sending your Son, Jesus Christ, when we were lost and could not find our way back to you. Forgive us when we have failed to believe and have not sought your will or your face. Humble us and help us to have a rock-solid faith, but if we struggle with doubts and fears, to bring them to you in prayer--and to seek your mercy and grace. Thank you, Lord, for never giving up on us! Thank you for your love and the promise of dwelling with you for all eternity. May we be stirred to share your loving promises to this hurting world. In Christ we pray. Amen.