

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18
Philippians 3:17-4:1
Luke 13:31-35
Psalm 27

Lent 2 C
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A Keeper of Promises

The north fork of the Skykomish River is one of my favorite places on earth. In the spring, the river rushes through the valleys, but in the lazy days of late summer, it settles down so much that it's little more than a babbling brook. The air is crisp and clear there, and the breezes carry with them the soft scent of pine needles. I've spent many delicious summer hours in that place, reading, writing, dozing, exploring. And at night, when the sun goes down and the air turns cool and supper is finished and all that needs to be done has been done, the night sky offers a whole new world of delight. When the moon is full, the sky is so bright that you can read without lantern or headlamp. Ah, but when the moon is new – when the moon is new there is nothing more wonderful than lying on your back as the daylight fades away and the sky turns inky black and as if by magic, the stars begin to appear. First one, then three, then thirty then so many that there is nowhere to look where there aren't hundreds and hundreds of stars. *"Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them"* God said to Abram. *"So shall your descendants be."*

It wasn't the first time Abram had heard this promise. When he was a much younger man, living with his father and his wife Sarai, God called to him a first time, and God's promise was much the same. *"Now the LORD said to Abram"* – God hadn't changed his name to Abraham yet, *"Now the LORD said to Abram 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing...'"*¹ Later, in his middle age, after Abram had become a very wealthy man, rich with silver and gold and more livestock than he could count, God called once again, and once again made the promise, *'Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are, northwards and southwards and eastwards and westwards; for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted.'*² So, we shouldn't really be surprised that today, when God tells Abram in his very old age not to be afraid and that his reward shall be great, Abram has a question. *'O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless ...You have given me no offspring...'* Then for the third time, God makes the promise. *"Look toward heaven and count the stars if you are able to count them. So*

¹ Genesis 12: 1-2

² Genesis 13:14-16

shall your descendants be.” Same promise, decades later... I’m pretty sure my response would have been “yeah, right, I’ve heard that before...” But not Abram. We’re told Abram believed the Lord; and God reckoned that he was righteous.

But Abram didn’t start out trusting God. After all, he’d heard the promise decades before and nothing had come of it. He and Sarai were far beyond childbearing years, so when this promise came this time, in Abram’s old age, his response was essentially *“You’re too late. You’ve given me no children.”*

We can understand this. If I had been promised something, anything, in my 20’s then promised it again in my 40’s then again in my 90’s, but it still hadn’t come true, I don’t think I’d be all that trusting. I imagine I’d call God into question too. Hearing the promise of children, nations, multitudes over and over again seems to have pushed Abram’s faith to the limit. He had lost his hope in God’s promise, a promise that was to have changed the future. That’s what promises do, you know, they change the future for us. And when big promises get broken, it’s hard to see a future.

But hopeless and futureless isn’t how Abram’s story ends – it’s never how God’s story ends. After going on and on about not having children, going on and on about how the future would play out, Abram finally stopped talking, and God made the promise again. And for some reason or another, Abram trusted God’s promise and we’re told the Lord reckoned it to him as righteous.

Abram believed in the Lord. And the Lord reckoned it to him as righteous. A better and more direct translation from the Hebrew is Abram believed in the Lord and he reckoned it to him as righteous. That way of translating could really change the meaning of the verse and the meaning of the story. Abram believed in the Lord and he reckoned it to him as righteous. Who is doing the reckoning, God, or Abram? If God is doing the reckoning, it means that Abram’s belief in God was what God saw as righteous. But if Abram is doing the reckoning, it means that Abram saw God as righteous. It’s God after all, so who really cares if Abram reckoned God righteous or not? Maybe no one but Abram... it seems important though because faith and hope and future are restored when Abram once again sees God as a keeper of promises.

However we translate, what matters here is trust and belief, even in the face of as yet, unmet promises. After a lifetime of waiting for the blessing of children, Abram was faithful. As it turns out, the promise came true when Isaac was born, and Abram, now Abraham, became part of a story that would go on and on, a story that would unfold throughout all time, a story that is still unfolding today. Abraham became a part of the story that was God’s future, a story filled with hope and faithfulness and blessing. This is our story too. We stand in a long line of people that began with Abraham and Sarah and runs all throughout time all the way down to you and me.

Although our bloodlines may not be those of Abraham and Sarah, the apostle Paul reminds us that *“Just as Abraham ‘believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness’, so, you see, those who believe ARE the descendants of Abraham.”*³ As it turns out, this story, God’s story, the story filled with promise and blessing is our story too.

Some of us have had a tough time believing we’re living in a story filled with promise and blessing of late. When someone dies too young, it can be hard to see promise and blessing. When a relationship ends it can be hard to see promise and blessing. When we’re entering year three of Covid, it can be hard to see promise and blessing. But it’s there. Even in the midst of heartache and a world we would never have dreamed, God is blessing and there is so much to be grateful for.

God promised and Abram believed – he’s the perfect model of a faithful person. It can be tempting to think we should be like that too. But Abram called God into question to the point of sounding like a whining teen-ager. Does that sound like a perfect model of faith to you? Actually, I think it might be. We do ourselves a terrible disservice when we think we shouldn’t have doubts or uncertainties about God and God’s promises, as though doubts somehow point to a crisis in faith. Faith is not blind acceptance, and it isn’t the notion that God has a plan for every single step we take. Wrestling with God, doubting God, even arguing with God – these are all ways of being in honest relationship with God. And as long as we’re in relationship with God, we ARE being faithful. That’s part of the story of promise and blessing. And God promising always to be with us - God with us - fulfills that story.

Up there in the sky is a star called Simon’s 4984, a star whose name is registered in the Library of Congress. There’s another star called Cooper’s 22718 and still another called Ava’s 7120. Simon is my son and 4/9/84 is the day he was born. Cooper and Ava are his children, my grandchildren. And on a clear night on each of their birthdays, 4/9/84 or 2/27/18 or 7/1/20, the stars that carry their names are visible in the Pacific Northwest sky. We named those stars when Simon and Cooper and Ava were born as outward and visible signs of their place in God’s story - a sign of God’s promise keeping – a sign of our faith.

“Look toward heaven and count the stars if you are able to count them. So shall your descendants be.” Amen

³ Galatians 3:6-7