

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

Lent 2 C
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island
March 13, 2022
The Rev. Karen Haig

Credo

As many of you know, the big island of Hawai'i is one of my favorite places on earth. It isn't only the beauty and sacredness of the place that I love, I also love the beauty of the people and their love of their place. In Hawai'i, the air sits on your skin so you can feel it. The breezes carry with them the soft scent of plumeria or gardenia or ocean spray. The days are warm and soft and at night, when the sun goes down and the breezes slow and dinner is over and what has been done has been done, the night sky offers a whole new world of delight. When the moon is full, it shines on the water like a pathway to heaven. But when the moon is new there is nothing more wonderful than walking on the beach 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.'*¹

It wasn't the first time Abram had heard this promise. When Abram was a much younger man, living with his father and his wife Sarai, God called him the first time, and God's promise was much the same. *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...'*²

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 this time the promise sounded like this: *'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.'*³

So, it should come as no surprise to us that when God told Abram in his very old age not to be afraid, that his reward would be great, Abram had a question. *'O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless ... You have given me no offspring...'*⁴ And this third time, the promise sounded like this: *'Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. So shall your descendants be.'* Third time, same promise, decades later. What would you have

¹ Genesis 15:5

² Genesis 12:1

³ Genesis 13:14-16

⁴ Genesis 15:3

thought? I imagine my response might have been “yeah, right ...” But not Abram. We’re told Abram believed the Lord and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness. Even though he and Sarai were far beyond childbearing age, Abram believed.

At our Lenten series last Wednesday evening, we spent some time together, exploring the nature and value of belief. The Cambridge dictionary describes belief as a feeling of being certain that something is true. It’s not a certainty about being certain that something being true, it’s a feeling I think Abram must have had. Even though the “fact” of Abram and Sarai’s advanced age made God’s promise seem impossible, somewhere inside himself, Abram had a feeling of certainty about the truth of God’s promises. Abram’s believing becomes even clearer when we understand the true meaning of the word “belief.” “Belief” comes from the word *credo*, and *credo* means *I give my heart to*. Believing is not hard and fast certainty, rather it’s a feeling of being certain that something is true. Abram believed and gave his heart to God’s promises.

God called Abram righteous because he believed. Even after a lifetime of waiting for the blessing, Abram believed, and after this third-time’s-a-charm promise came true, Abram 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. Abram became part of the story that was God’s future, a story filled with hope and believing and blessing. This is our story too. We stand in a long line of women and men that began with Abram and Sarai and runs throughout all time, all the way down to you and me. Although our bloodlines may not be those of Abram and Sarai, St. Paul, in a letter to the Galatians said “*Just as Abraham ‘believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness’, so, you see, those who believe are the descendants of Abraham.*”⁵ And so this story, God’s story, the story filled with promise and blessing... is our story too.

Even though the story is filled with twists and turns, with making mistakes and getting things right, getting into trouble and getting out of trouble, with being lost and being found, it is always, always a story of God gathering us in and calling us home. Every time we stray, God brings us home. And every time that happens, every time God and humankind are reconciled, we find ourselves in the Kingdom of Heaven. That’s the blessing in the promise. Heaven isn’t just a place at the end of life’s road; it’s a possibility to be realized in every act of love and justice and mercy right now. Our citizenship is in Heaven, St. Paul tells us, and that citizenship transforms our daily lives from ordinary to heavenly. As it turns out, *All the way to heaven is heaven.*⁶ We’re not perfect at living heaven in every moment, but the promise and the blessing are still true. Do we disappoint God? Yes. Do we disappoint each other? Yes. Do we disappoint ourselves? Yes, we do. We stumble, we fall and sometimes we fail. And yet God never abandons us no matter how heartbreaking our choices may be.

Looking over the city of Jerusalem, even as he spoke of his own demise, Jesus ached for the people to make better choices, to come to him, to listen to him, to follow him home.

⁵ Galatians 3:6-7

⁶ Catherine of Sienna

*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!*⁷ Some days after that, having traveled through dry and dusty mountains toward his destiny in Jerusalem, Jesus reached the Mount of Olives. Standing high atop that mountain, with the Kidron Valley below and the city of Jerusalem laid out in the distance, Jesus wept over the city he loved, the city that would not turn its heart toward God.

There is a beautiful little church on the spot Jesus is thought to have wept over his beloved Jerusalem. Most churches face east toward the rising sun, but this little church faces west toward Jerusalem, the same direction Jesus faced when he wept. And looking through the clear glass window behind the altar, we see the same view of Jerusalem that filled Jesus' eyes with tears. The name of the church is Dominus Flevit: It means *The Lord wept*. Sitting in that little church some years ago, I found myself weeping too. The altar of Dominus Flevit is adorned with a beautiful mosaic of a mother hen, wings outstretched, enveloping her baby chicks. There is a halo that rings her head, a halo that shows us divinity in the guise of a tender, vulnerable and fierce mother who is doing her best to protect her children and gather them in. This Christlike hen and her chicks are ringed by the Latin text of Jesus' saying, "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings..." The word for "gather" there, is congregare, the same root as our word "congregation." We are a congregation gathered safely under Christ's wings, committed by our baptismal promises to open our own wings, and to gather in all of God's beloveds.

God's Holy Spirit has called you together, a congregation committed to following Christ, serving others, growing in faith and transforming the world by sharing God's love.⁸ The God who is always gathering you in and calling you home is calling you to a new thing just now. Like Abram, you can't yet see the way God's promises will be fulfilled, but I thank our God that you believe in them. There is a believing, a feeling of certainty even in the midst of the unknowns of the next many months at St Barnabas, and that believing will carry you to the places God is calling you to go. You may wander awhile in the wilderness of the liminal space in between what has been, and what is not yet. Though it may feel a bit disconcerting, it will be an incredible adventure of discovery. You see, sometimes, probably often, when God calls a people to do a new thing, to be co-creators of God's story, there is a lot of letting go of what has been, so the new can rise up. It might be a little uncomfortable. You will likely find yourselves wanting to know how things are going to shake out. But like Abram, we don't get to know the story in advance. We believe, we give our hearts to God, and then we go to work, doing the work God has given us to do. God gave Abram sacred work to do, and God is giving St Barnabas something sacred to do too. Remember that this coming interim time calls you more deeply into God's story – to richer community, greater outreach, deeper formation, more vibrant evangelism, and of course, more love, more love, more love.

⁷ Matthew 23:37

⁸ St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island Mission Statement

Up there in the sky there are stars named for my son Simon and his children Cooper and Ava and of course, the star you named for me. Each of our stars holds within its name, the day we were born. And on a clear night on each of those birthdays, our stars are visible in the Pacific Northwest sky, each of them an outward and visible sign of our place in God's story - a sign of God's promise keeping, a sign of our believing, a sign of what we give our hearts to.

Look toward heaven and count the stars if you are able to count them. So shall God's blessings upon you be. Amen.