

Trust in the Promise
Genesis 15:5-6
September 15, 2024 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

Last week, our wonderful Sunday School teachers asked our awesome kids “Where did you see God this summer?” They had some amazing answers! One said I saw God “in my heart.” Another said, “in the stars.” Isn’t that wonderful? Whether we look inward to our deepest being or outward to all creation, we see God there. And I think these two faithful responses from our children – God in the stars and God in our hearts – provide a perfect frame for understanding today’s scripture.

This part of the Abraham story is long and complicated, so let’s review. Abram and his wife Sarai, as they are called at the beginning of the story, live in Haran, in what we would call southeastern Turkey. They are childless, and getting on in years. One day, God says 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. I will bless you, and I will make your name great, ... and in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

“I will show you a new land,” God promises, and “I will make of you a great nation.” I wonder how Abram felt, hearing that. These are amazing promises for a couple that is already late in life and without any children at all. Their family line has come to an end. There is nothing in human capacity that can make them fruitful. They are without hope of a future until God enters the picture. And God says, “I will make of you a great nation!” God is promising not just a single child, but a great many descendants, and a place in history that is significant on the world stage. This is a future that Abram couldn’t have imagined and only God can fulfill. In response to God’s promise, creaky, old Abram and crotchety, old Sarai pick up everything they own and they follow God’s call, to the land of Canaan.

So, Abram and Sarai are living in Canaan, and they are getting even older, as we all do, and still, they have no children. And one day God says to Abram, “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield. Your reward shall be great.” Now Abram is getting a little impatient by this time. I mean, years have gone by, and he was no spring chicken when this whole story started. So, Abram says to God, [*ahem*] “O Lord, um ... you have given me no offspring.” And God brings Abram outside and says, “Look toward the heaven and count the stars, if you can.... So shall your descendants be.” Count the stars. That’s how many descendants you will have.

Now, you and I know – because we have heard this story before – that by the end of the story, this couple does have a child, Isaac, and the parents get new names – Abraham and Sarah. But at THIS point in the story, when God shows Abram the night sky and all the stars, Abram doesn’t know for sure how the story will end. He has already done his part. He has picked up everything he owned, walked with his old, creaky body across miles and miles and miles of semi-arid land, and settled in a strange, new place, and God has still not fulfilled God’s end of the bargain. When will there be a child? Abram even offers to adopt one of his slaves as his heir, but God says “no.” Abram and Sarai’s union remains fruitless, barren. No matter that God has brought them to live in Canaan, they have literally no future there, by human reckoning. Their time on earth is coming to a close, and there still is no child. And God says, “Look at the stars.” And when Abram looks at the stars, he is able to trust in God’s promise. Why does looking at the stars make a difference?

On a really clear, dark night, when I look at the stars, I feel like I can just see forever. I imagine that is one of the amazing things about sleeping out on the mountain at Horton Center. There is nothing

between you and all of Creation, and all your problems become so, so small. When I stop and really see the stars, I can feel myself getting very, very still inside. The God of all Creation is in charge. I just have to do my part. I can leave the rest to God.

Our children also find God in their hearts. I love that. When Abram looks at the night sky, he responds with a heartfelt trust in God. There's a difference between "I understand how God is going to solve this infertility problem," and "I trust that God will fulfill God's promises for me." Do you hear the difference? There is a calm that comes from looking up and out and seeing God there. That calm fills your heart and gives God room to enter in.

Now, I wouldn't speak for the rest of you, but I know that I, personally, am older than I have ever been. There are things I thought I might do in my life that no longer seem necessary. When I was 30, I really wanted to hike the Appalachian Trail all the way from Georgia to Maine. But life happened, and I never got around to it. And I used to be a really fine quilter, but my eyes and my hands don't work together so well any more. So, some things I have let go as I have gotten older, and I don't regret the loss. But the central things, the deepest desires of my heart – for a happy and loving family and an opportunity to be in ministry with you – these things were given to me long after I had any reason to continue to hope for them. By answering my deepest prayers, God opened up new life for me, and in many ways, I feel younger now than I did when I was in my 30s and 40s. I now know with my whole heart that I can trust God with the rest of my life, and for eternity. Because God is God, and I don't have to be in charge of the big things. I trust the Creator of heaven and earth to bring me to where I need to be, in my earthly life and beyond.

What is God's call for your life? What promises has God made to you? What barren places still wait for life to flourish? As you look back on your life so far, can you see those promises working their way into your life? Or are they still waiting to be fulfilled?

Whether you are feeling gratitude to God for what you have already received, or you are living in hope for a future you can't yet see, look up! The psalmist writes, "I lift my eyes to the hills, from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth." So, lift your gaze from whatever is worrying you. See the beautiful lakes and the mountains that grace our lives. Find peace there. Then look even higher to the stars and to the ends of the universe. See God there. The Creator of heaven and earth sees you, hears you, loves you. And we can trust, because that great God holds us all in the palm of God's hand.

Amen