

Season after Pentecost - Promise Meets Hope

September 18, 2016

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Luke 3:8; Genesis 15: 1-6

*Lord, May the words I speak be those You want spoken,
may the words we hear be those You want heard. Amen*

Whenever I travel to Atlanta to visit my family, I don't have a clue of how to get anywhere. My sister picks me up from the airport and from then on I am utterly dependent on whoever is driving the car. Denise will patiently try to explain where we are and how that relates to other places, but to be honest, after twenty-some years of visiting I am still lost. Truthfully — despite my often obsessive wish to be in control and to understand what is happening and how — I'm fine with not knowing how to navigate Atlanta. For those few days it's a relief to have someone else drive while I just ride along. But that is only true because I trust my sister or brother-in-law do the navigating. I am confident they will get us where we're going even if I have no idea how we're getting there.

When we meet up today with Abram (later to be known as Abraham), he is having some trouble trusting that God is going to get him and Sarah where God promised. When the Lord first spoke to Abram in his homeland of Haran many years before, God told him to go to a yet-unknown place to which God would lead him. God promised Abram would be the father of a great nation and be a blessing to all the families of the earth. (*Gen. 12*) This was an extraordinary promise to a man and wife who were childless and well into their elder years. Yet Abram and Sarai climbed onto God's promise and let it take them far away to Canaan, trusting God to navigate and fulfill those promises. But years had lapsed and still there were no children. How can you father a nation when you have no son? So Abram begins to believe that he may have to take over the steering and navigating if they are ever to get to that promise of descendants. "Lord, maybe I should just let my slave and servant Eliezer be my heir and get this promise of descendants rolling."

It seems God already knows Abram is having doubts before he expresses them. "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." It's a reassurance of God's promise and faithfulness. Yet in the face of the current circumstances, Abram responds with a woeful summary of facts and his uncertainties about the realization of God's promises. It is deeply painful, month after month, year after year, for any couple who wants to bear children but cannot conceive. In Abram and Sarai's times, being childless also meant there was no one to "honor their father or mother," caring for them in their old age . . . it

meant their lineage, their family name and memory would vanish from the earth when they died. To Abram, it is not just he and Sarai who appear to be barren but also the future. He has tried to trust in God's promises but in the face of the present situation, he is faltering. And who can blame him? Who hasn't raised a voice of despair, doubt or anger to God when evil seems to be winning or our health is precarious, when we struggle to find a purpose in our daily work or a beloved spouse, parent or friend dies. At those moments, despite our faith and earnest prayer, we can find ourselves uncertain about a future where God's promised peace, presence and power will prevail. What we see with our eyes just doesn't seem to match up with the promises of God. Some may call it a crisis of faith. Our Biblical ancestors would tell us it's more simply about being human.

The LORD does not respond with anger or disappointment to Abram. Instead God invites Abram to step out of his tent — to step away from the confines of the present and the limits of his imagination. The LORD offers him an alternative vision. Look at the endless sky and countless stars. Can you close your eyes and go to that place where you saw more stars than you ever imagined — maybe you were out camping far away from any manmade lighting; or sitting on the edge of the Grand Canyon; or lying on your back on a beach or field; or driving between small towns in West Texas where the sky seemed to go on forever in all directions and the stars were on parade. Abram looks up in the darkness of the wilderness and sees. Do you hear that? When standing in what seems like emptiness and darkness, God points him to the stars in an endless sky. It's not so empty or dark when Abram stands there with the Lord. He hears God's promise to be steadfast and faithful once again and Abram believed. Abram came to a new conviction of faith.

Why the change after just staring at stars? There's no attempt by God to bribe, cajole or bargain with Abram. The stars are not an argument or concrete evidence that proves God's promises will be fulfilled. Yet looking into that sky at the stars that are too numerous to be counted, the fullness of God's power and love washes over and into Abram. As Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann tells us, "Abram did not move from protest to confusion by knowledge or by persuasion but by the power of God who reveals and causes his revelation to be accepted."¹ Faith is a gift freely given to those who will receive it from the LORD. "The same God who makes stars beyond number can also make a son for this barren family. And we understand no more about"² "how that is possible" than we do about the complete history of the stars, the intricacies of our bodies or how the mind of your spouse, teen or parent works. But we know it's true all the same. "[Abram] has abandoned a reading of reality which is measured by what he can see and touch and manage. That new orientation is not a generalized religious notion that 'everything will work out all right.'"³ Abram has

shifted his focus from the promise to the promise-maker. “The same God who gives the promise is the one who can make it believable. Only the new awareness that God really is God provides ground for Abram’s safe future.”⁴ Because the same LORD who made the stars can cause “a future to be given which will be new . . . [somehow bridging] the exhausted [barren] present and the buoyant future”⁵ — creating a Genesis, a new beginning.

Many centuries later, St. Paul would hold up Abraham as an example of faith: “he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned him as righteous.” (Gen. 15:6) To our modern ears we might conclude that Abraham came to be this pillar of faith who never failed to be faithful, who never tried to grab back control of the future from God. If that’s what you think, you would be wrong. Read the next seven chapters in Genesis. You will see he is like most of us who try to be faithful but don’t always make it or fully understand what faithfulness means. The “righteousness” attributed to Abraham is what happens when humans are the creatures they were created to be ---- trusting God’s intent, love and future in all circumstances. By the grace of God, Abram decided to accept God as God, the God of the stars and all that is good, the God who will overcome the deadly present with new life. Abram picked up his doubts, bypassed the unknowns to follow God in whom he would entrust his life and future. What about you? What about me?

Walter Brueggemann offers this insight: “The future of God’s goodness is open to those who trust themselves to [God’s] future, seeking neither to hold on to the present nor to conjure an alternative future of their own.”⁶ After his encounter with God under that starry sky, Abram and Sarai were still childless and probably couldn’t imagine how it could be otherwise considering their age. Yet they put their trust in God — creator, promise-maker, master of the future — to overcome the present with new life.⁷ When we are experiencing pain, sitting by the bedside of a one we love . . . when we feel overwhelmed, stuck or lost, it is the very time to be practioners of faith. It is when we are in the present darkness that we tentatively or definitely step out to take our place with Abram and the LORD under the starry sky, listening to God promise that whatever is going on in the present is not the end, is not all that there is, will not be stronger than the love and will of God, despite how it may appear. That is how the faltering faithful make it through the storms and sorrows toward the new life God holds out for us. We struggle or stumble one step, one prayer, one inhale of hope and the Spirit at a time, trusting the One who holds the future will holds us as well, until, we not only can see the stars in our darkness but can also see the dawn of a new day and believe, despite appearances, that it IS possible and coming. Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 9/17/16

1. Walter Brueggeman, Interpretation: Genesis Atlanta GA: John Knox Press, 1982 p 145

2. Brueggeman p. 144

3. Brueggeman p. 144

4. Brueggeman p. 143

5. Brueggeman p. 144

6. Brueggeman p. 146

7. Brueggeman paraphrase p. 146