

Second Weekend in Lent (RCL/C): "Unbelievable!"
Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18, Psalm 27, Luke 13:31-35
March 15-16, 2025
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Where have you seen the stars at their brightest, most beautiful, most plentiful?

I spent the summer after my freshman year of college an hour outside of Mexico City, at a high altitude in the middle of nowhere, so rural there wasn't any light pollution: definitely "nearer my God, to Thee"! The stars there were spectacular, but so are the stars on the summit of Mauna Kea on the Big Island of Hawaii. **If** you count Mauna Kea's undersea base, it's 56,000 feet high, taller than Mt. Everest which rises to a "mere" 29,000 feet. The height of Mauna Kea and remoteness of the Big Island make it a perfect location for the NASA Earth Observatory.

We know from the Old and the New Testament and from other world religions that mountains are often identified as holy places. The Native Hawaiian people hold Mauna Kea as sacred, creating a conflict between science and religion. When we visited a number of years ago there were demonstrators protesting the presence of the observatory and proposed construction of a Thirty Meter Telescope as the desecration of a holy site. The issue is ongoing.

I bring up stars because of today's 1st lesson from Genesis, in which God wonderfully:

.... brought [Abram] outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be."
(Genesis 15:5)

Uncountable! Immeasurable! Unbelievable, from any human point of view....

The whole **problem** was that Abram was so darn old. Even worse, so was his wife Sarai, who was **long** past childbearing years. At some point, despite God's earlier promise that they'd be the forebears of "a great nation" (Genesis 12:1-2), Abram and Sarai had accepted what looked like the sad reality that they'd never have children. Abram, who was over 75 years old, had adopted a

favorable slave as his heir, a fellow named Eliezer of Damascus (whom, by the way, we'll never hear of again). Eventually, in God's time, God decides it's time to make a visit, re-instill hope, deliver a more specific promise to Abram. Here's the paraphrase from *The Message*:

"Don't be afraid, Abram. I'm your shield. Your reward will be grand!"

2-3 Abram said, "GOD, Master, what use are your gifts as long as I'm childless and Eliezer of Damascus is going to inherit everything?" Abram continued, "See, you've given me no children, and now a mere house servant is going to get it all."

4 Then GOD's Message came: "Don't worry, he won't be your heir; a son from your body will be your heir." 5 Then he took him outside and said, "Look at the sky. Count the stars. Can you do it? Count your descendants! You're going to have a big family, Abram!"

6 And he believed! Believed GOD! God declared him "Set-Right-with-God."

"...[Abram] believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness."

(Gen. 15:6) St. Paul **loved** that verse, kept returning to it, made it the bedrock of his teaching that **we are justified by grace apart from works**. God doesn't save us because of what **we** do; God saves us through what **God** does in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We just need to **believe**, to **trust** that what God has done is **enough**. Faith isn't intellectually subscribing to a particular set of theological beliefs. Faith is trust in God and in God's promises. The letter to the Hebrews tells us: *"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."* (Hebrews 11:1) It also says:

*By faith, with Sarah's involvement, [Abraham] received power of procreation, even though he was too old, **because he considered him faithful who had promised**. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.*
(Hebrews 11:11-12)

Unbelievable, except as seen through the lens of **faith**.

Abraham knew God to be faithful; Abraham trusted God to keep God's promises. Truth be told, though, like us, sometimes Abraham's trust was kinda-sorta. Ten years into setting up household in Canaan, the Promised Land, Sarah's thinking, "All the pregnancy tests have come out

negative, and time's a'wastin', so I'd better help get this show on the road." She suggests that Abraham have a child with her Egyptian maid, Hagar. That sounds shocking to us, **but** remaining childless was **so** shameful and **such** a blight on people's lives that it was a legit practice in those days for a man to conceive a child with someone other than his wife. As long as the child was literally born into the lap of the wife, that became her child, too.

In retrospect, it wasn't such a great idea. Driving the action, after all, is lack of **full** faith in God's faithfulness to keeping God's promises. Hagar conceives and delivers a son, Ishmael. Scripture says that Hagar then gets on her high horse and is **disdainful** toward her mistress Sarah, because Hagar is Fertile Myrtle and Sarah isn't. That's too much for Sarah to take. She convinces Abraham to "deport," to expel Hagar and Ishmael from the household: not a "finest moment" for either Sarah or Abraham. Casting out a single mother and young child from a household in that desert environment was a certain death sentence. It's only by divine, angelic intervention that Hagar and Ishmael survive (no thanks to Abraham and Sarah).

This wasn't the first instance of Abraham's less-than-saintly, flawed human behavior. Twice on the way to the Promised Land Abraham had passed off his beautiful wife Sarah as his sister, and essentially **given** her to two other men, a pharaoh and a king. He's afraid if they know he's her husband, they'll kill him to take Sarah for themselves. Sarah is only "returned" to Abraham because God punishes or threatens punishment to the pharaoh and king.

I'm airing this biblical "family laundry" because it's easy for us to think that it's **easy** for **saints** to have faith, to trust God to keep God's promises. I simply want to emphasize that it's **not easy**, but it **is possible**, by God's grace. Scripture is full of examples of God making and keeping promises, so reading the Bible, dwelling in the Word, **does** buttress our faith. Our own and others' lives are **also** full of examples of **God being faithful, God keeping God's promises**. This is why

we have our daily Lenten e-devotions and our midweek evening devotions given by laypeople, because these are avenues for us to connect faith and life, to share God-incidences in our lives, to bolster one another's faith with real life stories of how God makes a difference in our day-to-day living, how God is faithful. Many of the stories appear in the teller's rearview mirror, because often, especially in traumatic times, it's easier to identify God's presence in retrospect than in the moment. This past Wednesday Catherine Gentile was our speaker. She told of God's faithfulness 50 years ago: an experience of God's loving presence and healing power that shapes her to this day. She said the miracle of faith didn't happen until she **surrendered** to what God had in mind for her. I keep turning over that word *surrender* in my mind. I hold onto things, including problems, pretty tightly. She reminded me to pray for grace to **let go**. "Let go and let God," ideally. **Trust** that the God who has been faithful in the past will be faithful in the present and future as well. Imperfect Abraham "⁶ **believed!** Believed God! God declared him "Set-Right-with-God... because he considered him faithful who had promised."

The intro to our worship this week says, "Though we sometimes doubt and often resist God's desire to protect and save us, our God persists."¹ We see that driving divine love most clearly in our Lord Jesus Christ. We **doubt**, we **resist**, yet God **persists**, all the way to the cross on Good Friday, to the Garden on Easter morning, and way beyond to the Jersey Shore this weekend. Let us help each other believe what is unbelievable except as seen through the lens of faith. Let's share our stories of God's faithfulness so we can trust that the God who has been faithful in the past will continue to be faithful in present and future. Amen

¹*Celebrate* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2024), 2nd Sunday in Lent, March 16, 2025.