

## Look to the Heavens for the Promise of God

(Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18)

Sermon delivered by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia  
Second Sunday in Lent, March 17, 2019

In the name of the one God, creator, redeemer, and sustainer. Amen.

Abram was a man with questions. I think it is fair to say that he was a man experiencing doubt. In and of itself, that is quite remarkable given what had happened to him not long before. Just a few chapters earlier in Genesis he had heard the voice of God tell him to drop everything, pack up his family and move to a new land. And he did it, without question.

God said go ... and Abram went.

But after responding without question in chapter 12, Abram now asks things reflecting his doubt. *What will you give me? How am I to know that I shall possess it? And God responded. What will I give you? I will give you an heir; in fact, I will give you more heirs and descendants than you can count. How do you know the land will be yours? Simple: I will make a covenant with you.*

In short, the answer to both questions was quite simply God saying, "Abram, you will receive because **I promise.**"

As I thought about this passage over the last few days, I continued to be drawn to the image of God asking Abram to look up into the heavens and try to count the stars ... for the number of his descendants would be even greater than that. Each star represented a man or woman who would come after, each part of a growing number of generations, each increasing in size through the passage of time. As we know, this became a reality; Abram was the spiritual ancestor of many. In fact, as you may recall, he is the root of the three largest religions in the world: Christianity; Judaism; and Islam.

Our common starting point was very much on my mind as in the middle of a restless night between Thursday and Friday I learned the news of the murder of 49 men, women and children at two mosques in New Zealand. My heart was torn out; I pondered my own questions ... *why* and *how*. They are the same questions I wrestle with after every act of violence, after the tragedy at Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, after the tragedy at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, after the tragedy at Sandy Hook, after the tragedies in Las Vegas ... and Orlando ... and Charlottesville ... and Quebec ... and Paris ... and London. Tragedies that happen far too often in places far too numerous to count.

Each time I ask **how** and **why**. **How** could brothers and sisters do this to one another? **Why** would those magnificent points of light in the heavens that God showed to Abram ... those stars

created to share a common existence in a common universe ... tragically work to extinguish one another rather than joyfully enhance each other's brightness?

Like Abram, I find myself asking how I will know things will be okay. How do I know things may one day get better? In those moments, as with Abram, I hear God answering "Because I promise." And like Abram, I find my reassurance looking up to the heavens.

In the story of Abram, God asks him to count the stars – to see the descendants as individuals, increasing one by one, then two by two, down through the generations. But what is equally important, I think, is **where** the stars are found. The universe does not simply contain them; the universe **surrounds** them ... it **envelops** them. As the stars are the descendants of Abram and his promised inheritance, the universe is the God who encompasses them ... who surrounds them ... who blankets them with love.

Even as stars are born, burn brightly, and are extinguished at the end of their existence, the universe is still there. **God is still there**. Even as we are born, and live our lives, and one day die in the hope of the resurrection promised by Jesus, **God is there**. In the midst of all that is temporary ... in all in this world and this universe that is fleeting ... **God is there**. In the midst of the struggles we may face, among all of the (in the words of the collect from Compline) changes and chances of this life, **God is there**.

That I feel is the great unspoken promise of God in this passage from Genesis. Throughout his moments of doubt, **God will be there**. Throughout the generations of descendants promised to Abram, **God will be there**. Throughout the duration of the covenant forged with Abram, **God will be there**.

And as the stars in the sky explode into existence and flicker into darkness, **God will be there**.

Let us pray.

*O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Amen.