



'Counting Stars'

Second Sunday in Lent
8:30 & 10:45 am, Sunday, February 21, 2016
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

[Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18](#); [Psalm 27](#); [Luke 13:31-35](#)

Let's pray: May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

The late theologian Richard Niebuhr maintained that the first response of humanity to God is always one of distrust. In other words, human beings may well believe in God but yet not trust God. Perhaps you and I consider that "believe" and "trust" are synonymous with one another, but Niebuhr says that's not accurate. I found his thoughts to be interesting, and I wonder if Niebuhr is right. That we human beings may often believe in God, or believe in the concept of God, or believe in the doctrines of the Church about God, but we do not always trust God.

The story of Abram and Sarai (or Abraham and Sarah, as they eventually are called by the Lord God) provides the perfect image for Niebuhr's words. What we see today in our Genesis reading, and what takes place in the chapters previous to this reading and in the chapters following it is this movement from distrust to trust. All along the way, there is a basic belief, but it turns out that trust takes time to grow.

And the only way trust can grow is where there is a relationship between the two parties. An ongoing dialogue and interaction. Trust is truly a relational thing.

But thanks be to God we also have a relational God. That is the other thing we discover in our Genesis reading today. So trust in God is, in fact, possible.

The long saga of Abraham and Sarah is a story of the Lord God making promises to them, and then calling them to live out their lives trusting in those promises. In previous chapters, but reiterated in our reading today are God's promises that he will provide a child, an heir for this aging couple who have not been able to bear children at all. The Lord God makes another promise as well, but it is wholly dependent upon the fulfillment of the first promise of a child: God promises Abraham and Sarah that their descendants will be great in number, as numerous as the stars in the sky. These descendants will form a great nation who will live to the praise of God. These descendants (here comes another promise) will live in an abundant land, flowing with milk and honey, and they will be God's people.

The Lord God, having made these very big promises, then calls Abraham and Sarah to journey from the land they call home and go to the land God promises for them. That journey and experience is described in the book of Genesis. And that journey is a big

step to take, particularly when life seems so uncertain, when the future while promised is still unseen. But Abraham and Sarah take those initial steps because they believe in this God. And I suspect they deeply want to trust this God, too.

But I don't think they quite succeed in that trust thing. Or at least, they begin to lose any trust they may have had in God by the time of our reading today. That's because God's promises haven't come to fruition. There is no heir apparent, except the child of a slave woman in their household. That's not quite the way they envisioned that particular promise of a child working out. So, no possibility of descendants and a mighty nation anytime soon. And that promised land? Abraham and Sarah now reside in the land, but they don't possess it. It is not theirs. It belongs to others. Strike three on those promises.

Ultimately, there is only one thing going for Abraham and Sarah and the Lord God: They are at work building a relationship. It will take a lot of dialogue, a lot of conversation to grow that relationship. But Abraham and God, as it turns out, are all about conversation.

Much has been made in scripture of the great faith of Abraham. In the New Testament book, the Letter to the Hebrews, Abraham is referenced several times as the model for Christians. But any faith that is born in Abraham I believe comes about because of the ongoing conversation Abraham has with God. Maybe that's what Abraham models for you and me. He is always talking with and listening to God.

Even at this point in our story, when it seems Abraham and Sarah have little trust in God, Abraham continues to talk with God. First, he points out the big discrepancy between promises made and the reality he and Sarah are experiencing. He questions the situation and God's promises. He wonders what the future holds. He is honest about his fears, his sense of hopelessness. He lets God know what's deep in his heart.

And the conversation is not one-sided. The Lord God, as I said, is all about conversation as well. Once again, God makes promises, and we have this dialogue dance between Abraham and God. God makes a promise ("I am your shield; your reward shall be very great"), and a skeptical Abraham protests. So God responds to the skepticism ("The slave won't be your heir; it will be a child of your own who will get the land"). On the heels of that promise, God takes Abraham outside, under the night sky, shows him the stars of the cosmos and says "Just try to count them—that's how many descendants you shall have." Funny, these are not new promises but the same old ones, and no collateral given to make them seem any more possible or real. All God offers is his word, once again, and a stargazing experience together.

Yet somehow in the midst of that conversation where the two of them go head-to-head on this issue about God's yet unfulfilled promises, comes a rather surprising response from Abraham. He accepts the promises given without any collateral in hand. I say what we witness is a growth in Abraham's trust in God, but I can't explain it. That's certainly not the response we would have expected, but that's what happened.

And that's why I believe that somehow in this relationship that continues to grow between Abraham and God, trust is born.

Continue reading the book of Genesis, and you'll see how the promises are eventually fulfilled. But that may be less remarkable than what we see in our story today. Trust, and where it takes Abraham and Sarah—now, that's remarkable.

So what does this mean for you and me? Well, I suppose it means we should be talking with God, too. A lot. An ongoing dialogue with this God who wants to be in relationship with us. A conversation that best happens through prayer and worship and studying scripture. I read a blog by Presbyterian minister Melissa Bane Sevier on this biblical account, and she suggests that during Lent—and beyond—we ought to take up the spiritual practice of relationship. Remember that we're created in the image of God (so says the book of Genesis at its very beginning). And if we are created in the image of God, and this God is a relational God, then we are relational too. Only you and I are going to need to practice it.

The point is God is always about reaching out to the people he made. From his conversations with Abraham, to the judges and kings who led Israel in faith, to the prophets who became his mouthpiece, to, at last, his Son who in words and deeds revealed God's love for us—well, it's clear God keeps working at the relationship. In order that we might at last begin to trust him and live out of that trust. No doubt there will be some skepticism on our part. There will be times we'll neglect to communicate with God. No doubt we'll look at our lives some days and wonder whether God is there. Of course, some days God will look for us and wonder the same about us. But God still yearns for us to trust him that we are in this life together with him, and that the new life he promises—a promise made and reiterated over the centuries—is real. So when we find our trust failing or lacking, just start talking with God. And start counting stars. AMEN.

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