



“Counting Stars”

First Sunday in Lent
8:15 & 11:00 am, Sunday, February 21, 2016
The Reverend Dr. Jack M. Horner
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Psalm 27;
Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

Grace and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

There is an Australian statistics and probability expert, Kenyan Smith, who did a five year study of adult men and women and found that those who wished for things on stars were more apt to report that their dreams had in fact, come true. Those he studied reported that their dreams were 46.5% more likely to come true if they gazed at the night sky and made a wish on a star. Forty-six point five percent! Brothers and sisters, that's a lot better than normal chance. It reminds us, doesn't it, of what we used to say when we were kids: "Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight, I wish I may, I wish I might, have this wish I wish tonight." I guess there is some power in the stars.

The Disney Corporation has even made that idea their theme song, "When you wish upon a star, makes no difference who you are, anything your heart desires will come to you." (I love singing in sermons; it's just fun.)

Abraham, the Old Testament patriarch, or Abram as he's called at this point in Genesis, also needed to look to the stars. He was already very old; his wife, as well. God had said that He would make him a father of many nations and yet here he is, waiting for that promise to come to fulfillment. The promise seemed delayed to him. God was taking his time with Abram. It had been many years, and for us reading scripture, three chapters before in the book of Genesis, a number of different years. God had promised that he would give him this blessing despite his advanced age, and here he waits. He waits still for a first-born son to carry on the family name. In the fifteenth chapter that we read, Abram is so desperate to see the fulfillment of that promise that he says to God that maybe he should just adopt his servant to be his heir. But God says, no. God the creator of the heavens and the earth shows him in a dream, has him look up to all of the stars in heaven and He says, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And then God recounts his original promise that he made to him. He recounts that he had moved him from what was familiar and comfortable. Abram and Sari had lived in the city of Ur in what is now Babylon. It was a commercial center even two thousand years before Christ. Excavations that have been done of that ancient city have found beautiful homes with gardens, of large enough size to make them seem like, well, the McMansions of today. It was a good city

to live in those times. It was a prosperous city. And yet God called Abram to leave there and to go into the unknown, to go into the land that God would show him.

To seal the deal in Abram's mind, God has Abram sacrifice animals and cut them in two. The animals that he chooses are all symbolic; these are animals that then would be used for sacrifice in the Jewish Old Testament rituals. They represent Israel itself, and their faithfulness to their God. These animals lying on the ground attract birds of prey, nations that have risen up against Israel, perhaps Egypt or others. Abram is to scatter those birds of prey to allow God to show Himself to him. At night through fire, God walks through the parts, and it represents His eternal presence with His people, with Abram and his children, forever. That's what God promises to Abram on that night, to be with him and his descendants. But the promise that is offered, for his descendants to be as numerous as the stars, is not going to be fulfilled in Abram's time, but to be fulfilled in future generations. Yes, God will give Abram a son, but it will be years and years before the fulfillment of that promise. And if you like reading Genesis, we've got a lot more chapters to go with Abram. And even then, he has more years to wait until he receives that son. But God gives a covenant, a promise to Abram in that night sky, and because Abram believes his God, it is his faith that is given to him as righteousness. He is in a right relationship with God because he trusts God in that promise. And Abram's faith allows him to enter into that covenant relationship with God.

Brothers and sisters, sometimes we find ourselves in bad situations. We wonder whether or not the promises of God will be fulfilled in our lifetime. We question whether or not God is truly with us. We go through broken relationships or financial strains or perhaps addictions, personally or in our families. We know what it's like to have shattered dreams. But God addresses our bad situations with His amazing love and grace. He gives us strong promises that you and I can count on through those dark times. In the cross, in the cross Jesus died to take on the sins of the world – your sins, my sins. He took on the brokenness that we experience in His own body on the cross, and offered that cross to us as a sign of promise, an everlasting covenant in heaven. And when we gather as a community in Christ, we hold out our hands and we receive that body in our body in the sacrament of Holy Communion. We are nurtured and fed and unified with God and with each other. We are offered a holy promise. And it's there for us to see, as it's held up at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer for you to gaze on and to look at, for you to see it as a promise like Abram and the stars in the sky, a myriad of blessings upon blessings for your life and for mine. So stand firm in the Lord, hold on to God's promises, trust them, accept them, receive them, rely on them. For God gives us a holy promise, and we are able to respond to that promise in faith as we look upon the Holy Communion and receive the Body and Blood of Jesus. As we look up on the stars we can be reminded of God's abundant promises and holy covenant that He makes with each one of us. And so as Paul says, "Wait for the Lord, be strong and let your heart take courage. Wait for the Lord." Amen.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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