

Genesis 15:1-6

Abram

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Rev. Kelley L. Becker

Today's text is a story of a conversation between God and Abram, who will later become Abraham. The essence of the story is that in just 6 verses, Abram moves from unbelief to belief. In some respects, it is the dawn of his faith. On Friday afternoon, I finished the sermon I was planning to preach today. And it was a pretty good sermon. The point I made in it was that just as God interacted with Abram, meeting him where he was in the midst of a pretty dark time, God interacts with each one of us in ways we can understand, at times when our lives seem dark and chaotic. Like Abram, as we learn to recognize the ways in which God is showing up for us, our faith grows, we begin to trust God, with the little things and the big things; not that God will, like a puppeteer, just pull some strings and fix everything, but that God will be there, keeping the promise that we are never alone. Of course we will still have our doubts at times, but we will have hope too. It was a solid sermon.

And then, Friday night Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg died. And all of a sudden, I found myself doubting my own sermon. I felt every ounce of hope being sucked from my heart. My phone went crazy. Some of you texted me to make sure I knew, to share your sadness and fear, and together we realized the thread of hope we had been clinging to just might have finally broken. It just could not be. But it was. So, this sermon is an attempt to find hope in the story of Abram's despair...and in the midst of my own despair...and maybe yours too. If you are looking for hope, hang with me this morning.

Last week, we began at the beginning with one of the creation stories, with God forming the first human being from the earth and bringing the human to life with God's own breath. Later, in the story, God split that first human into two and created the first woman. The two of them did pretty well until they resisted God's way by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When they did that, suddenly everything changed. Their relationship with God changed. Their relationship with the earth changed. Their relationship with each other changed and even the way they saw themselves changed. And while the story may seem a

bit of a downer, I mentioned last week that there is a message of hope in it for us. There is hope because that story is only the beginning of God's story. We are in Genesis.

Throughout Genesis, we read about how the ancient Israelites understood God and their relationship with God. Their stories imagine a God who works with human beings, forming and reforming, like a potter, responding and creating, seeing *and* loving them for who they were and who they could grow to be. The people in these stories certainly didn't make it easy for God, though.

Once expelled from the garden, Adam and Eve had offspring, Cain and Abel, who are famous because Cain murdered his brother Abel. Cain went on to have his own children who went on to have their own children, filling the earth with many people who, like their parents, struggled against the ways of God. Finally, in Genesis 6:5, the biblical writer wrote, "The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually." However, the story goes on to say that there was one man who was getting it right, Noah. You know what happened next. The story of the ark and animals 2 by 2 and 40 days of rain. After the earth dried out from the flood, Noah's family populated the earth again. The people got along so well that eventually they worked together to build the Tower of Babel, which wasn't a good thing, and so the people were scattered.

It is at this point that the biblical narrative narrows a little bit. It's like God said, "This is exhausting dealing with all of the people at the same time. It's like herding flamingos." So, God chose one man to work with, one man who God hoped would not be resistant to God's ways and whose life would be a blessing to the world. God chose Abram.

At the beginning of Genesis 12, God called Abram and Sarai (who will later become Sarah) to leave their home in the land of Ur and go to a new land. They packed up their extended family and went, believing God's promise of descendants as numerous as grains of sand. When the clan grew too large for the land to sustain all the herds and people, Abram's nephew, Lot, took his part of the family and animals, and went the one way; Abram took his part of the family and animals and went the other way. Unfortunately, during a war between Canaanite tribes, Lot was kidnapped. So Abram and his men went to battle the hostile tribe,

rescuing Lot and his family and their possessions. Abram returned home and we pick up the story from there, in Genesis 15:1-6:

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” <sup>2</sup> But Abram said, “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” <sup>3</sup> And Abram said, “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” <sup>4</sup> But the word of the Lord came to him, “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.” <sup>5</sup> He brought him 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.” <sup>6</sup> And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

These verses represent a pivotal moment in Abram’s story and, theologically they are among the most important for the Abrahamic tradition. So, let’s talk about why that is and why it matters for us today. Abram and Sarai left their home for nothing other than a promise from God. There was no map, no planner, no hard evidence that God’s promise would come to be, just the promise. And what was the promise? That Abram would have land, descendants, and be a blessing to the world. And as we have talked about on many other occasions, the inability to have children in the ancient world was dangerous and shameful. It was dangerous because without children older folks had nobody to care for them. It was shameful because children were seen as a blessing from God. The assumption was if a couple didn’t children, they had done something wrong (probably the woman had done something wrong) and God was keeping them childless. This belief, like others in the ancient tradition, have long since been debunked by science and we believe in science.

As this part of the story begins, it had been a long time since they had left their home, Abram and Sarai continued to get older, and still there was no baby. Other people were having babies, but Abram had not even one direct descendant. The barrenness persisted. And what good was having land with nobody to pass it along to? Abram was over it. And we can relate. Many of us are in that place right now, aren’t we? Like the barrenness for Abram and Sarai, COVID-19 persists; division persists; racism persists; isolation persists; illness persists. We are over it.

And just when we thought we couldn't be any more anxious, and any more afraid, any sadder, Ruth Bader Ginsberg is gone. Everything is not okay.

I imagine Abram sitting by himself, thinking about everything he had been through since leaving Ur, realizing it was all a mistake, thinking he didn't have much to show for his years on this earth, ticked off that he fell for God's empty promises. It's therapeutic sometimes to just let it all out, to list all of the things that are wrong. In the midst of that moment, God came to Abram in a vision. With these six verses, his story makes a new beginning, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." Abram doesn't say exactly this, but the gist of his response is, "You clearly cannot keep your promise, so what can you realistically do for me? And also, I don't need your shield, I need a baby." One of my favorite things about the Hebrew Bible is that in so many places, the people in the stories are pretty real with God. They tell it like it is and have no trouble being brutally honest with God. Abram says to God, you promised, you haven't delivered, and you and I both know it."

God responded to Abram, not really with different words and not with proof, but with a visual aid, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Abram walked outside, looked up at the sky, and...he believed. What changed? The fact that there were more stars than he could count didn't prove he would have even one son. Why did Abram suddenly believe? What was it about gazing up at the sky that convinced him to trust God?

Theologian Dr. Walter Brueggemann says that within the magnificence of the night sky was a revelation, a sign from God. It was a vision that took Abram completely by surprise. Like Abram, we struggle with assurance that is not based on reason, but on an ancient awareness that God is God. That assurance is given in this dark moment to Abraham. "He knows, and the knowing can only be credited to God's brooding care. The same God who gives the promise is the one who makes it believable"<sup>1</sup>.

In some respects, the night sky serves as a kind of sacrament for Abram, a concrete, visible reminder of a future and a promise that cannot be seen.<sup>2</sup> In the

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<sup>1</sup> Brueggemann, Walter, *Interpretation A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Genesis*, John Knox Press: Louisville, 1982, 142.

<sup>2</sup> Brueggemann, 145.

same way communion reminds us that there is a future that includes a place for everyone, enough for everyone, and where we all recognize we are in the company of God, Abram looked at the night sky and was reminded that the same God who hung those stars, could and would also give him an heir, a legacy.

He believed God, even though there was still not a baby in that nursery. He recognized that the ones “...who believe the promise and hope against barrenness nevertheless have to live with the barrenness”.<sup>3</sup> And for us, the hope we have that the world will not always be like it is today does not allow us to sidestep living in this world as it is now. We believe God’s promise of a world made whole, but yet, here we are, still living in this broken world. So, how do we get out of bed in the morning when our hope is overshadowed by the death of someone who, for many of us, was the embodiment of that hope? How do we put one foot in front of the other when our hope is overshadowed by the isolation we are feeling as a result of COVID-19, by the anger and division we see on the news and social media, by the injustice that continues to affect our neighbors who are Black, immigrant, gay, trans, homeless, and hungry?

That’s the million-dollar question, isn’t it? That’s really why you are here today, for the answer to that question. The search for the answer to that question is the reason I find myself in the midst of this sermon that I didn’t plan to preach. Here is my best guess and I will admit, I am hanging by a thread on this. This story reminds us that, just as Abram saw a sign of God in the night sky thousands of years ago, there are signs of God everywhere for us today. And I believe these signs are the things that will keep our hope alive, even though we are feeling “over it.”

I was working in my office one day this week and a man, not realizing the door was unlocked, rang the doorbell. When I got to the door, he greeted me and asked if the church provided gas vouchers to people who needed them. I told him I was sorry, but we didn’t have any. He thanked me and explained that the reason he needed gas was that he lives at the Willow apartments, down the road from the church and he goes over to Mary Martha Outreach and gets food for several of his neighbors. One of his neighbors can’t get out at all and the others do not have transportation.

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<sup>3</sup> Brueggemann, 140.

I was delighted to introduce him to our Love in a Pantry cabinet! I told him it was there because we are aware that some of our neighbors are experiencing food insecurity and that many don't have transportation to the west side. I told him he could take whatever he and his neighbors need any time and I helped him bag up what he had chosen. Later, I saw his car again and I assumed he was coming back to get something else. I was wrong. He got out of his car with a bag and put food into the cabinet. It was as if God said to me in that moment, "Look outside. I've promised you a world made whole and look, it's happening right outside your window." We did that. We did that together.

You know, we aren't so different from Abram. All he wanted was a legacy, he wanted to leave something behind, his land, his children, he wanted all of it to be a blessing to the world. One of our regional ministers, Rev. Michael Davison, is fond of saying on Sunday mornings, "Be a blessing, Disciples." To be a blessing...I think that's what we all want. We want the world to be different, better because we spent time on this earth. We want our legacy to be one of love and peace and justice. We want to have lived our lives as a reflection of God's love in this world. And we look to stories of our faith ancestors, like Abraham and Sarah, like Jesus, to teach us how to do it. We learn from their legacies.

And we learn from other lives and legacies as well. Today, we mourn the loss of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg. She was my hero. She inspired me to "be brave with my life," and to work for justice. This nation is a different place for women, for members of the LGBTQ+ community, for so many of us because of her. Honestly, the world feels pretty dark for me right now. But what I know is that we cannot see the death of this hero as a sign of the absence of hope. Oh no, her life and the work she accomplished must fill us with hope and her death must spark the hero in all of us. She was a woman who was never silent about the things that mattered, she believed in equality and justice with every fiber of her being. And she was fierce. We all have to channel our inner RBG. It's time for us to be the heroes in our own story. And I think we will be in good company.

I will end this morning with this, posted Friday night by a friend of a friend on Facebook. The author's name is Lindsey Kiersey and she wrote,

If she had lived 100 years it would have been too few.  
In a world where women are expected to comply, she said "I dissent."

In a world where love has been kept in a box with rules, she said "I dissent."  
In a world where borders are drawn tighter and walls are built higher, she said "I dissent."  
In a world where fiction is told as truth and facts are twisted into lies, she said "I dissent."

And so, on a night when it feels like the pendulum has swung off its fulcrum, like there is no place to make a U-turn, like the darkness is winning, I will say - loudly so as to convince myself - I dissent.

For decades she stared unafraid into the faces of misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia, and bigotry, daring them to blink. She wrote reams and spoke volumes and did push-ups while her detractors... I don't know, ate cheeseburgers or whatever.

So, because she did, I can. Because she did, I will.

Tonight feels like the end of something, but it doesn't have to be. This is a moment that, instead of being the death of hope, can be the birth of a renewed zeal. Giving up feels very easy, even warranted, but it also feels disrespectful to her memory. We can take this moment and turn it into a movement. We can, like the Notorious RBG, dissent. We can, like her, dissent until the very breath leaves our bodies.

Thank you, Honorable Justice Ginsburg. You fought harder and longer than you should have had to, for us, and we are so grateful...

May her memory be for blessing.  
Amen.