

Count the Stars

After Adam and Eve's departure from Eden, the Genesis story winds its way through Noah and the flood, to the tower of Babel and finally to a genealogy tracing the line from Noah to Abram, or Abraham as he will come to be called. This morning's text places us in the middle of Sarah and Abraham's story. At the end of chapter eleven, we first meet them as Abram and Sarai. We are told that Abram is Terah's son, and that Sarai is Abram's wife. We are also told that Sarai is barren and that she has no child (in case the detail about her being barren didn't make her situation about being childless clear). In the very next verses, at the beginning of chapter 12, we hear:

Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, *and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.* I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and *in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*'¹

This surprising news in light of the verses that come just before these. The text has just told us that Sarai is barren—a shame-filled, frightening status for a woman in ancient times. In the next breath we hear that God has big plans for Abram and those plans involve children, lots of children. And Abram also happens to be 75 years young. What could God be thinking? And yet, Abram and Sarai pack up and go, taking their livestock, their livelihood, and their lives with them. After spending time in Egypt, parting ways with their nephew Lot, coming to the aid of kings trying to hold off invading armies, and

¹ Genesis 12: 1-3, NRSVue, emphasis added

graciously refusing to accept the spoils of those conflicts, Abram receives a blessing from one of the kings. The narrative continues with our reading for this morning. [Read Genesis 15: 1-6]

A few years ago we were late booking a place at Atlantic Beach for our annual beach trip, so we found ourselves on Emerald Isle. Tucked on one end of the island, our condo offered the best view of the night sky I have seen in years. With no streetlamps or pool lights between us and the beach, there was nothing to get in the way of the show the sky put on every night. It was breathtaking, no doubt because it was so rare, at least for me. Even now from our backyard on Spring Street, with just a streetlamp or two on the block, we just don't see the stars like that very often. And we're not alone.

According to one article:

Back in 1994, the Northridge Earthquake caused major blackouts in the Los Angeles area.

During the hours of darkness, something strange happened. People began to call 911 to report a strange ethereal light in the sky...What they were actually seeing was the Milky Way. Light pollution was so bad in the City of Angels that many people had never seen our galaxy.²

How ironic that the people who lived in and among another kind of stars had no idea what real stars looked like. The article goes on to explain that the culprit is known as light pollution, artificial light that gets in the way of our seeing the true stars. Using a weather satellite, scientists in Italy have developed a light pollution atlas. Chief researcher, Fabio Falchi and his colleagues have determined that:

[About] 83% of the world's population and more than 99% of the U.S. and European populations live under light-polluted skies...One measure of the severity of the problem is whether people can see the Milky Way. By this reckoning, the problem is severe. 'Due to light

² <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/602364/light-pollution-atlas-shows-why-80-percent-of-north-americans-cant-see-the-milky-way/>. I am grateful to my Narrative Lectionary preaching colleague, Nicolette Siragusa who pointed me to the article.

pollution, the Milky Way is not visible to more than one-third of humanity, including 60% of Europeans and nearly 80% of North Americans,' say Falchi and [his colleagues].³

What must it do to people when the only night lights they know are streetlights and neon signs? Can you imagine what it must be like never to see the stars?

Abram's life in the desert in no way resembles the light-polluted world in which we live. As the sun sets each evening, the only artificial light comes from the embers of a campfire. The desert sky glitters with stars, and yet, things look dark. Abram has left his father's homeland and has traveled in stages as God has led him. God tells Abram that the land of Canaan will belong to Abram's offspring. Abram builds an altar to the Lord and moves on. Now Abram is once again in his tent wondering what lies ahead. He has been promised descendants that outnumber the grains of dust, and yet, here in the middle of nowhere, he still has no child. He is beginning to feel exposed and a bit desperate, surrounded by foreign kings with no hope in sight. It is almost as if God has eavesdropped on Abram's internal monologue filled with doubts and fears. God speaks to him in a vision. Once again God insists that God himself will be Abram's shield, his defender. And once again God promises that Abram's reward will be great. But Abram's not having it. The reward, the blessing, the promise hinges on having children and at this point, Abram and Sarai's nest is still empty. He is close to having no heir, no legacy other than a servant named Eliezer. Abram is not getting any younger. The clock is ticking. Maybe Abram has spent too much time staring at that dust, maybe he has come to believe that he and his hopes are only dust in the wind. Maybe he had begun to think God's promises are, too.

³ <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/602364/light-pollution-atlas-shows-why-80-percent-of-north-americans-cant-see-the-milky-way/>

We've been there, too, haven't we? We've taken the job, answered the call, decided to trust that the good thing on the horizon was in fact good, that things would work out. We've taken risks and leaps, we've reached for the stars, trusting that we would soar or at least be caught, only to find ourselves disappointed or confused. The clock is ticking, God. We're not getting any younger. It's hard to trust that God is faithful when the promise is still just a promise.

Rather than argue with Abram, God takes a different tack. God leads Abram outside. "Look at the stars, Abram." God says. "Try to count them, if you can." The stars have been there all along, of course. It's not as though Abram hasn't seen them before, but here God casts those stars in a different light. It's more than simply a change of scenery; in this shift, God draws Abram beyond his own tight quarters, his own four walls, so to speak. God expands Abram's vision by clearing away the things that blur his vision, the pollution that distorts his view. God reminds Abram that the promise is—and always was—bigger than Abram and his own tent. God has plans that begin with Abram and Sarai and those plans do not end with Abram and Sarai. Yes, it is crazy to say that an old man—"as good as dead," the Apostle Paul will go on to say—that this old man will be the beginning of a nation, the *beginning* of blessings upon blessings. Inside that tent, all Abram can see is how ridiculous the promise is, how foolhardy he was to believe in the first place. Inside that tent, Abram begins to lose sight of the vision and to lose track of the God who cast the vision to begin with. So God tells him to count stars, to try to grasp the enormity of God's promise. It's hard to count stars when I can't see them. It's hard to count stars when other things cloud my vision. It's hard to see the big picture when my vision is confined to the walls of my own tent. God is not telling Abram to buck up, to look on the bright side, because God is not a Hallmark card. God is not making light of Abram's fear or frustration or disappointment. In fact,

God meets Abram in the heart of Abram's darkest moment and calls him forward into a new moment backlit by the starry host.

The stories that we read in Genesis were shared around wells and campfires under the stars for generations before they were written down. The writers are thought to have gathered the stories and created a written narrative of how the people of Israel came to understand themselves as the people of God. Clearly, they saw God at work in and through them, even in the most difficult times. Famine, slavery, and deportation all gave the people of ancient Israel reasons to doubt the promise, and yet, they insisted that God remained faithful throughout. In bringing Abram out of his tent, God invites him not to wish upon a star, but to renew his trust in the very One who created the stars to begin with. This Creator of the stars will not be bound by tent walls or by human imagination, nor will the promise the Creator makes.

Dr. Falchi, the Italian scientist I mentioned earlier says that light pollution is getting worse, and yet he still holds out hope, because of places like "Lombardia and most other Italian regions, Slovenia, two regions in Chile, and part of the Canary Islands," where legislation attempts to curtail light pollution so that future generations can see the stars.⁴ These scientists have access to the latest and most sophisticated technology including weather satellites and the Hubble telescope, but Falchi's point is that we shouldn't have to have the right equipment to see the stars. *Everyone should be able to see the stars.* Stargazing is not simply a nice hobby; seeing stars is central to understanding who we are and essential to remembering whose we are. When we lose sight of the stars, we risk losing sight of

⁴ <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/602364/light-pollution-atlas-shows-why-80-percent-of-north-americans-cant-see-the-milky-way/>

the Creator of those stars and we risk forgetting our Creator's intentions for us and for the entire universe with us and even through us.

We live in uncertain times, in-between times when anger, fear, and suspicion pollute our vision and distort our perception. Unending warfare in Haiti, the West Bank, and Ukraine, increasingly dangerous storms and wildfires, poisonous politics, and unchecked hatred, derision, meanness, and cynicism contaminate the airwaves and try to convince us that all is lost. It's tempting to hunker down in our tents, to seek solace in the familiar comfort of our own camps. And yet, dear ones, we are not called to hunker down; we are not created simply to lament inside our tents.

"Go back to your tent. Nothing to see here," the light pollution tells us, and we begin to believe it. And yet, the Creator of the universe insists on tugging at our sleeves and inviting us to venture out, to look beyond what our limited and clouded vision insists is true. The Lord of all calls us to rub our eyes and turn from all the false stars that pretend to light our way, to look up and out, to peer deep into the glorious universe, to count the stars if we can, to remember that we are numbered in Abram's stars, and to recognize that countless others are numbered in ours, too.

And when we are able to see the stars, we realize we have a choice. We can place our faith in a shooting star or a flash in the pan, we can hunker down in our tents, OR we can step out, lift up our eyes, and renew our faith in the very Creator of the stars, the One who has been faithful from the beginning, the One who is faithful even now, the One who promises to be faithful until the end of time, and by the grace of God, perhaps this renewed faith can lead us to ask again how we who are so very blessed are being called to be a blessing in our Creator's name.

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