

Sunday, September 18 “*In Spite of Evidence to the Contrary*”
Scripture: Genesis 15: 1-6 Hebrews 11 (selected verses)

The United Church of Canada Song of Faith begins like this:

God is Holy Mystery,
beyond complete knowledge,
above perfect description.

Yet, in love,
the one eternal God seeks relationship.

From the earliest days of the Abrahamic faith tradition these have been central claims:

- that God desires to be in relationship with God’s good creation, all of it-- including people like you and me;
- that creation itself is designed to express-- to radiate the glory the One-- our Creator;
- and finally that we are meant to be in relationship not only with one another as human beings, but also with God and creation.

Biblical Scholar & Theologian, Walter Brueggemann writes that Chapter 15 of Genesis, likely contains the oldest statement of Abrahamic faith in our scriptures. This story, which we are just touching on today, is likely the primal source from which Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all sprang. The portion of the story we just read gives us a glimpse into the relationship between Abram and God. It includes God’s promises to Abram, the long delay in the fulfillment of the particular promise that Abram and Sarai would have an heir; and the challenge and counterchallenge that ensues as Abram laments the Divine delay, even as God reaffirms the Divine Promise. Abram’s frustration echoes down through the ages, as God’s people cry out again and again, “How long O Lord? How long until you deliver on your promises?”

We all know what it feels like to wait and to wonder, to hope and to despair, to pray and lament. We all know what disappointment and heartache feels like. Many of us might add our cry to Abrams, “How long O God? How long until you deliver on your promises? Where is the life of abundance you have promised to those who love you?”

Abram has inherited the land, he has vast stores of silver and gold, his servants and livestock have increased in number; but still, he and Sarai have no heir. And the truth is, without an heir, nothing else seems to matter.. at least for Abram. We can imagine Abram’s stream of thought-- “Who will inherit the land?” Who will carry on the family name? Who will pass on the stories of our lives? Who will remember me, and the things that mattered for me and those whom I have loved in my lifetime?” “When? When will I hold in my arms the miracle who is flesh of my flesh?” “These are painful questions for Abraham--questions that have haunted the human family since its very beginnings.

Abram and Sarai, of course, do eventually have a son, an heir. They joyfully name him Isaac, meaning laughter, referring to Sarai’s laughter of disbelief, when she is told she will bear a son in her old age. After God has repeated the divine promises to an incredulous and perhaps disbelieving Abram, our story says that Abram is led outside to look up at the night sky. As he stands under the vast canopy of stars, he is told to count the stars. He is told that he will have descendants to outnumber the stars! It is an outrageously extravagant promise... an unconceivable and unbelievable word. But, as he stands awe struck under the immensity of the night sky, Abram, suddenly recovers his faith. Our scripture says, that in that moment, “Abram believes God.” Why? What is it about gazing up at the night stars that opens up the doors of possibility within his soul? It causes me to wonder if we too might find our faith in God and our hope for the future renewed if we would more often go outside and simply gaze at the stars? Would we fall into such a profound sense of awe and wonder at the magnificence of creation that we too might begin to believe that anything is possible?

It does seem that there is something about immersing ourselves in the natural world that allows us to connect to something deep within our own souls? We who spend our lives dwelling in cities do not find these moments so easily! We have not only polluted the air, the soil, and the waters of this earth, we have polluted our night skies. We are so surrounded with artificial light, that we no longer see the stars! When is the last time you stood outside under the canopy of a night sky and gazed up in wonder at the stars?

East Indian poet, Rabindranath Tagore writes, "Only in the deepest silence of night the stars smile and whisper among themselves."

Do you remember times when the lights have gone out in the city? I remember them as being inconvenient, aggravating, and a little frightening... especially the one in that cold and snowy December! But I also remember it as so lovely... driving and walking around the city at night and sensing a deep quiet and a strong inner and outer connection... what might be described as a sense of mystic union-- with God, but also with everything and everyone that surrounded me. Everything seemed somehow softer...lovelier. People were kind to one another. There is something about being in and with nature that heals us, feeds our souls, connects us, and sometimes fills with wonder and hope. Moments of awe are often accompanied by a deep sense of communion that can open us to a richer life. I am convinced that there are possibilities that stretch out before us-- even as we stand with eyes unseeing and hearts unbelieving. Might we join Abram under the stars?

I came across a writing by a Rabbi on prayer the other day. Sadly, I couldn't find it when I went searching for it again. But he wrote about taking his prayer outside and his intuitive sense that the natural world was filled with the energy of the Divine. He spoke about his deep communion with the flowers, the trees, the sky and squirrels-- each one in its own way mediating to him the presence of God.

I have sat meditating on a candle, or even with a poinsettia, and learned of the intricacy and beauty of creation. The secret... and the practice... is to learn to be truly present, to be open, to be quiet, to observe, and to listen. If we do these things from time to time, we may catch intimations of the divine. We too may come to touch into a Presence that is deep and sublime—and a Knowing that restores our faith, bolsters our hope, increases our joy, and reorients our steps in the direction of love. Perhaps that is what Jesus meant when he said, "I have come that you might have life, and have it abundantly."

Robin Korth in her book, **Soul on the Run** writes this personal anthem:

On this day, let me bring all that I have to this day. Let me swing wide the doors of my heart and soul and say, "Bring it on!" Let me open my eyes and see the wonder around me—the people and the souls that walk this day with me. Let me smile from my heart and let my eyes crinkle with welcome. Let me listen with every ounce of my being to you and to the planet as it sings to me. Let me throw my spirit to this gift—to this life—with every ounce of me that I have. Because... this is it. This is me calling all of me to the universe in delight and love.

Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation*, page 140.

Korth, Robin, **Soul on the Run**, Balboa Press, Bloomington, In., rev. date 2/12/2015.