

Sermon Preached by Pastor Jennifer Rose

February 21, 2016

Lent 2

“Count the Stars”

Dear Friends in Christ: Grace be unto you and Peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I took an astronomy class in college, my senior year at Luther. It was an entry-level science class, but so many people wanted to take it that you were really only guaranteed to get in when you were a senior. It was a great class. I learned so much. Luther had a planetarium, and I remember getting to go in there and learn about so many things. We also had an observation tower on the science building with these really cool telescopes. We had frequent star-gazing parties at 2-3-4AM - whenever stars and planets were readily visible. (And hey - we all just walked across campus to the science building in our PJ's - the things you can get away with in college!) It was such a great experience. I have forgotten so much of what I learned in that class - but what I remember that will always stick with me is that our universe is so huge! Really, the more I learned about the way the planet Earth works and the stars and the other planets the more I became convinced of God's creation of it all - even though the exact details of that creation are sort of sketchy at best. Wow. How could this amazing universe - this amazing creation that does so many fascinating things be put together in any other way? God is the only explanation I can come up with.

In today's Old testament reading from Genesis, God makes some insanely huge promises to Abram. Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." "So shall your descendants be." Whoa! That's one huge promise. Did you know that there are about 10 billion galaxies in the observable universe? And there are an average of 100 billion stars per galaxy. So I'll let you do the math of multiplying 10 billion by 100 billion. That's a number so large that my mind just sort of explodes even thinking about it! So shall your descendants be.

Remember that at this point in Abram's life he was childless. He was about 75 years old when God made this crazy promise to him. Can you imagine receiving a promise like this from God? Those of you in the room that are in your 70's - how many of you feel like having a baby in your current stage in life?

It's a crazy promise. It's insane. At this point Abram and Sarai had completely written this parent thing off and while they had desperately wanted to be parents, they just figured that it wasn't going to happen. But Abram trusts God. Most of us think that he's crazy. Sarai doesn't feel like she should trust so much and so she convinces Abram to have a child with their servant Hagar, whom they name Ishmael. Sarai was mad. Abram was 86 years old when Ishmael was born. Still no son for Sarai.

God returns to Abram when he is 99 years old and gives him the name Abraham, and re-iterates his promise - that he will be the Father of a multitude of nations. God also re-names Sarai to the name Sarah - and re-iterates his promise that she will bear a son. Abraham falls on his face and laughs at God, thinking that Sarah, who is now 90 years old, can't possibly bear a child. Sarah overhears this promise and laughs too. God gives them instructions to name this son "Isaac" - which means "He Laughs."

Do you ever feel like laughing at God? Like Abraham, do we trust God's promises?

I mean really, when you think of some of the promises we have received, they are absurd! Crazy! We are nuts!

We laugh Sarah's laugh, not because we have faith, but because we find it impossible to have it. That is the disturbing truth being held up before us in this week's story: that faith is not a reasonable act and that the promises that God offers us are crazy enough that they are hard to believe. Abraham and Sarah laughed because they had reached a dead end in their lives and because they had adjusted to it. They had accepted their hopelessness just the way, if we are honest, we too accommodate ourselves to all those barren places in our lives where the call to believe in "a new thing that God will do" seems, quite frankly, nonsensical.

Abraham believed but the doubt returns. It seems that's how faith is. Solid one minute; then like quicksand the next. One moment you feel strong and confident in your faith. The next, the questions and doubts weigh heavy on your shoulders.

Which makes me think that this word believe has become distorted over the years. At least in the world of faith and religion. Every week, we stand up and confess our faith in the Apostles' or the Nicene Creed. The word Creed comes from the latin word Credo - which means to believe. Yet, I know people, faithful, God-believing Christians who have a hard time with certain parts of the Creed. Why? Because they just can't in good conscience say that they believe Jesus was born of a virgin. Or that he rose from the dead. In fact, I myself, in the past, have been lead to not say certain parts of the Creed because I just couldn't say that I truly believed them. They didn't make sense in my head. I couldn't be certain they were true. They didn't seem rational.

And that is where the problem lies. Since when did believing in something mean certainty? When did it mean knowing something to be absolutely true in your head? You see, to believe something isn't to know for certain. It's to trust it. Even when there is no evidence to prove it. That word Creed, Credo, is, as I said, usually translated to believe, but it can also mean to give one's heart to. That is to say, I give my heart to this when my head can't make any sense of it. I like that translation much better - I give my heart to God the Father, almighty Creator of heaven and earth. I give my heart to Jesus Christ. And I give my heart to the Holy Spirit. To believe in something, to give your heart to something does not mean you can't have doubts about it. In fact, faith and doubt go hand in hand, I think. A life of faith will produce questions of doubt. And questions of doubt will help produce a life of faith. Faith is not something you get

once and then have forever. It is fluid and ever evolving. It changes throughout life. Which is why we say the creed together and not individually. So that when one of us can't believe part of it, someone else can and says it for us, believing it for us until we can believe it ourselves. Together, we say the Creeds for the littlest ones among us, until they can give their hearts to it themselves.

Abraham gave his heart to God, but he still had many questions. And God kept answering them by restating his promise to Abraham, over and over again, in different ways – you will have descendants and you will have land. Eventually God responds to Abraham through a covenant ceremony. It is a ceremony that says, “If I don't keep my promise, then let me be like these animals. Cut in half.” It is the ancient version of “Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye.” But the one who makes the promises was not Abraham. It was God, symbolized by a smoking pot and a flaming torch. God makes the promises to Abraham without requiring anything from Abraham in return. These promises of offspring and land. As it turns out, Abraham's faith is not part of the equation. God makes the promises, seals the covenant. Abraham is simply the one to whom they are made.

It was many years later before Abraham finally had any children with Sarah. He continued to spend the long nights by the window, looking up and wondering, “How long, O Lord?” But, if Abraham were here today, I can guarantee that he would not be looking up. Instead, he would be looking out. Out at all of you. All of you stars from that nighttime sky thousands of years ago that have finally fallen right down to earth and into these very pews. He would see nothing but you, the descendants of Abraham, the very promises of God in flesh and blood. And with a tear in his eye and a smile on his face, he would say, “Well, what do you know. The promises of God are true after all. Every one of them.”

So friends, when you doubt God's amazing promises to you - the promise that God will love you forever - the promise that you are God's dearly beloved child - the promise that God will never leave your side, look outside at the vast magnitude of this world. May you and I together look at the stars, proclaiming with the words of the great hymn, “Then sings my soul, My Savior God to Thee! How great thou art! How great thou art”

Thanks be to God.
Amen.