

Genesis 15:1-6

15After 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.”

²But Abram said, “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” ³And Abram said, “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” ⁴But 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.” ⁵He 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.” ⁶And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

11Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ²Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. ³By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

⁸By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.

¹⁰For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. ¹²Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.”

¹³All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, ¹⁴for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

Faith and Hope

Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16

Over the last several months I’ve seen this video on Facebook called ‘Your Place in the Universe.’ It begins with a picture of the earth from orbit which is every bit as beautiful as you imagine it could be. And then it proceeds to move further and further away until the earth is just a barely distinguishable dot of light somewhere in the Milky Way. It goes on to show us that all the stars we can see are just a small portion of the stars in that great galaxy and even that galaxy is small compared to all the galaxies in the universe. It calls to mind that great hymn we sing where the writer says, *O Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder, consider all the worlds Thy hands have made, I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder, thy power throughout the universe displayed. Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee, How great Thou art, how great Thou Art! Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee, How great Thou art, how great Thou art!*

Sometimes we need that perspective don’t we? To stand and look at the stars and realize just how small we are. To realize that there is so much more in the universe than we can possible imagine or see, filled with mystery and wonder. And I don’t know about you but it gives me a sense of hopefulness as I consider that mystery. It

fills me with dreams and visions of possibilities and purpose. Because as small and distant and little as old planet earth is, God loves us deeply. That in the midst of billions of stars and planets, this is the place where Love's Messenger shows up. Where Divine promises are made. Where we experience the Creator in unexpected ways. No wonder God told Abe to look up! See the stars, see the wonder and mystery of it all! And then he whispers in his ear, "Trust Me." Leave your comfortable life and follow me into the future. *How Great Thou Art! How Great Thou Art!*

I think if I were to choose one person from the bible that I liked the most it would be Abraham. I find him to be the most human of characters. He has his faults, but God loves him anyway, and that leaves me feeling very hopeful most of the time. He must have had many moments when he wondered what God was up to and if he could really go where God was leading him. Fortunately for us he did. He stood next to God and looked up to the heavens and heard that wonderful promise that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. A dream. A vision of the future. A moment of faith and hope.

And it has me wondering, when was the last time you looked up? It's getting harder and harder to do these days, not only because of light pollution, but because we spend our days looking down at our iPhones and iPads, trying to find Pokémon in someone's backyard. When was the last time you looked up? When was the last time you felt called to follow God into an unknown future? I've shared many of my own stories about this but this morning I would like you to think about the last time you encountered God in this way. Can you put into words how you've encountered God? At our last Presbytery meeting, Pastor Michael McKee had us share our story with someone in the room. It was wonderful to hear those stories and he reminded us when we were finished that this is evangelism. This is how we share our story. So what is your story of faith? How do you understand what it means to have faith or be faithful?

Sometimes having faith reminds me of being asked to drive in a strange town with someone sitting in the back seat giving you directions. You don't really have any idea where you are going and you are hoping that someone will tell you when to turn left more than 2 seconds before you need to. It can be a little unnerving especially in a town with a lot of traffic. At least a good GPS system will let you know that in one mile you will turn right. Sometimes faith and following God's call feels like this. You have to trust that directions will come when you need them and hopefully sooner rather than later. Sometimes, you just have to be patient.

And, just like Abraham, we all have a vision for our lives...we dream...we have creative visions, we often feel compelled to act on ideas and visions that God gives us through the creative power of the Holy Spirit.

And we often find ourselves in that moment just like he did where we wonder if we can trust God and the vision and move forward, or should we just stay in our tents? I know I have often resisted following God's calling (you can ask any of my close friends how many times). Not sure if I can trust, not sure if my "Faith" will hold. And unlike Abram I find myself saying "God, I don't know about this. I may just have to dig in for a while!"

I am reminded of that story you've probably heard about the footsteps along the beach? There were two sets of foot prints along the beach where you and God walked together through life and then there was just the one set of foot prints.

And the gist of the story is that when there was only one set of footprints that that was when God was carrying you. You know the story. But I recently read a different take on that story one that really reflects my faith journey a bit more accurately and maybe this is true for you as well.

God says "My child, I never left you.

Do you see those places along the beach with only one set of footprints? It was then that I carried you. And that long groove over there in the sand, is when I DRAGGED you for a while. Faith is not as easy as it sounds.

Frederick Buechner in his book (*Secrets in the Dark; a life in sermons*) says: "Faith is different from theology because theology is reasoned, systematic, and orderly, whereas faith is disorderly, intermittent, and full of surprises... Faith is homesickness. Faith is a lump in the throat. Faith is less a position on than a movement toward, less a sure thing than a hunch. Faith is... Waiting"

And I am always moved as I read these stories of faith, particularly Abraham's, because it strikes me that faith isn't about believing certain creeds or theological concepts or statements. It isn't about going to church or being religious. It isn't about being pious or even remotely holier-than-thou. It is about being faithful which means trusting in God. Trusting and hoping. Knowing in your soul that whatever may be happening right now in the world at large, or in your own little circle of that world, that the promises of God are true. You can't prove them. You can't even defend them. They make absolutely no sense to those who don't trust in God and yet, you know in your heart that you have reason to hope. And your hope is all God needs to come alongside you and lead the way.

Like Abraham we "consider him faithful who had promised." That God does indeed prepare the way both now and in the future and even though that is a complicated theological idea, I hope in it. I hope in a Kingdom of Love that I can't always see and don't always live in. I hope and trust that I will have glimpses of it along the way. I hope and trust that I see it just beyond the horizon, both this Kingdom on earth, and the one I hope to live in for eternity. As I've told my brother, a devout humanist, I am happy to spend my life living and trusting in this mystery of God's love and mercy and I'm pretty certain it will take all of my lifetime and then some.

Pastor Kathryn M. Matthews shared this beautiful personal story of faith about her grandmother which I found deeply moving. She said, "My grandmother was a woman of faith. I don't say that because she went to church all of her life and raised seven children who went to church all of their lives, or because she was named "Mother of the Year" by the Catholic Daughters of America or because she had a son who was a priest and a daughter who was a nun.

I say my grandmother was a woman of faith because she was a strong woman who endured much with the help of the trust she had in God. She had to raise small children on a farm while my grandfather found work in the city in order to support the family. Two of her children died. She suffered many illnesses in her life, including tuberculosis, and gave birth to triplets — at home, at the age of thirty-nine — in 1929! No sophisticated medical facilities or skilled surgeons were there to help her.

However, my grandmother never wavered in her trust in God's loving care for her and for those she loved. She loved my grandfather very much, and just a few months after he died — both of them were 88 years old — she hurt her back reaching for one of her great-grandchildren. She spent a few weeks in the hospital, saying good-bye to all of us who loved her, and then slipped into a coma. At the very end, surrounded by her daughters, she suddenly sat straight up in her bed, lifted up her arms toward the end of her bed and looked beyond them all, saying with a wonderful smile on her face, "Oh...it's so beautiful!" And then she died.

Now I'm not saying that all people of faith have such a beautiful experience of death. For many people, death is much more difficult, and I'm grateful to God that my grandmother did not suffer as much as she might have. But I do wonder about what happened that day when my grandmother died. My mother and her sisters didn't see anything at the foot of the bed. But my grandmother did. You might say that she "saw" something that day, something that was "invisible" — and yet that is what my grandmother did all of her life — she had *faith*, she

had conviction in what was not seen, she had the assurance of things hoped for. I have a feeling that my grandmother would have said that God is good all the time, and all the time, God is good.”

She closed her comments by saying, “Trusting in God means setting out on a journey, like Abraham and Sarah and so many other people in the Bible, a journey of faith toward a future where God's design for creation will be fulfilled — a journey toward that "Heavenly City." Trusting in God means seeing God's goodness in the worst of times, and believing that God's blessings will outnumber the stars in the sky, even if we could count them (which, of course, we can't). Trusting in God means seeing beauty and grace in what may seem like the smallest of wonders.”

What I've come to understand is that it is in looking backward over the scope of our lives...examining our own stories...hearing the stories of others, as well as our own faith journey, that we begin to see God's faithful, patient, purpose and guidance in our lives. And we remember that perhaps we can learn to love the dreams God has for us. And perhaps like Abraham, step out in the assurance of faith...follow that inner voice...towards that as yet unseen promise that God has given us. That even though we feel like strangers and foreigners as we travel on this journey of faith, we look forward to that 'better country,' that is, a heavenly one” as the writer of Hebrews says. And God who loves us beyond measure is delighted and unashamed to call us his own.

I would like to close with this prayer written by Thomas Merton who was a Trappist monk.

It is from his writings “Thoughts on Solitude” and it speaks powerfully to me of my own faith journey. He prayed, "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."

Let us pray. Loving God, who art ever faithful. We give you thanks for this journey of faith and we praise you for your goodness and guidance along the way. We often are hesitant and often stray from the path but you always bring us back with gentle and loving nudges. Help us to not fear the future but to trust in your eternal presence in our lives as we serve others in your name.

We give you thanks this day for family and friends who love us and encourage us. We thank you for the many blessings in our lives. Blessings of shelter, food, clothing, jobs, resources to care for ourselves and others, cars, safety, and technology that makes our lives more comfortable and fun. We give thanks for the freedom to worship and praise you without fear of persecution. For the many freedoms granted to us by our nation which many people around the world do not share. We give you thanks for all these things.

We also pray this day for those in need. those who are hungry and homeless. Those seeking meaningful work and purpose for their lives and their children. For those fleeing for safety and from war and violence. For those living in domestic violence and family strife, for those who are ill or facing surgery. For those who mourn and grieve. Loving Father surround them with your love and a lead us all out of the wilderness into the promise of your kingdom here on earth.

We remember also those dear to our hearts and we lift them to you now in prayers both spoken and silent...

God of love and light, let your love shine through us now as we go out into the world serving others. Feed us with this joyous feast and give us courage to continue the journey of faith that you have called us to. And when we falter, come alongside and whisper in our ears that, "All will be well" if we trust in you and hold on to hope. Grant these prayers for we ask them in the name of Jesus who taught us to pray saying...