

Numbering the Stars
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
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Genesis 15:1–6

This is not our typical Advent where we gather things and people around us with holiday parties and planned family get-togethers. Advent 2020 we are not going to be crowded around the table. Even so, it doesn't mean that we can't celebrate. This Advent let us set our sights on the stars. The Wisemen who came from the East took to the night sky to follow the star that led them to the baby king. It was the Wiseman who traveled to a foreign land hoping to find the promised one. They were led by a star. As we travel our own unique journey feeling as if we are in foreign land of viruses and economic uncertainty, social injustice, and realizing the fragility of our earth, let us look to those travelers. For the wisemen, there must have been times when they thought they were travelling on a fool's errand but nevertheless continued until they found Jesus our Messiah. Let us follow the glimmer of light that leads us not to star studded celebrities or powerful heads of state, but to an unassuming child of working-class parents.

Today on the second Sunday of Advent, we turn to the beginning, the book of Genesis and God reaffirming God's promise to Abraham. We pick up the story when Abram, as he was known, at that time was going through some dark and discouraging period in his life. Earlier in Genesis, God promised that Abram would be the leader of a great nation. So far, Abram has not realized any greatness. He is a nomadic farmer who has experienced drought and famine, who is at the mercy of established nations such as Egypt where he passed his wife Sari off as

his sister to save his own skin. At this point, he is questioning whether God's promise is real. He and Sari are unable to bear a child so he has no legitimate heir upon which he can build this nation that God has promised. Perhaps it is just a pipe dream and not a reality.

Picture Abram on a clear dark night in the middle of nowhere, as the encampment and the animals are settling down for the night, walking away from the campfire, perhaps going up a small rise away from the others. Abram is a bit lost, unsure of what to do next. God is not providing the way God promised. What is Abram's purpose, what is the use in the life that he and Sari have, what will happen to them? Abram unsure, discouraged and alone and angry, calls out to God.

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."

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?" And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." 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." 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." And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

This is the Word of the Lord; thanks be to God.

We have all that moment, a time away from the light pollution of the city. Up north, the Boundary Waters for me it is in Maine or my time in a little village in Senegal. We look up into the dark clear sky and for a moment, we are transported beyond whatever worry or fear or care or

anything else is on our minds. The stars, the Milky Way, the sheer number that are there. It is a moment never forgotten.

We can go days, months surely during the hours of daylight not thinking about the thousands of stars that we cannot see. We may look up but we see weather patterns; cloudy or sunny, thunder clouds, cumulus or whimsy cirrus, scooting along the sky but not once do we think about what is there hidden from our view until we are away from the city lights and we see, in those moments the numbers of stars in the sky and, it takes our breath away.

The Psalmist expresses it so well. “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established, what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor (Psalm 8).”

How small we are when we see the number and the vastness of the heavens at night. How timeless, those stars are the same that Abram saw that night when he was lost and alone. As he looked up into the night sky, he knew he knew that God would hold true to God’s promise. Although we falter and are weak and afraid, God does not falter or God is not weak and God relieves our fear. In that night sky, Abram found a peace. From that time, he knew he could trust God and that he was not alone. God’s promise is true.

Vincent van Gogh, was a troubled soul and a genius in his artist work. He spent his last years in an asylum. A year before he took his own life, he wrote to his brother Theo, “This morning I saw the countryside from my window a long time before sunrise, with nothing but the morning star, which looked very big.”

Van Gogh was describing his inspiration for one of his best-known paintings, *The Starry Night* (1889)¹. The window to which he refers was in the Saint-Paul asylum in Saint-Rémy, in southern France, where he sought respite from his emotional suffering while continuing to make art.

Vincent van Gogh in looking into the heavens found a peace that alluded him in the daylight. Whatever demons he had to fight, he was able to put them aside when he looked into the nighttime sky. His painting inspires and moves us to this day.

Where do you find peace? We are very aware that peace can be elusive and peace can hide in plain sight. In our present conditions where things are so different and even our tried and true traditions of the holidays cannot be achieved, we seek peace. So many of us have had to change our plans of gathering for the holidays and that robs us from being close to those we love. Anxiety and stress, loss and grief are very real to us as individuals and as a community, as a nation and as a world, finding that peace which passes our understanding is not always at hand. God's promise to us in Jesus is that God's peace is with us. Jesus speaks to his frightened disciples, "Peace, I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid (John 14:27)."

Let us, in this season that is so fraught with things beyond our control take moments to discover that peace. Not our own fabricated peace but the peace that is beyond our imagination and reckoning. In this time and in this place, God is with us. As we look at the vastness of space that is impossible to comprehend, we know that God numbers the stars in the heavens as well as the hairs on our head.

¹ MoMA collection; Vincent van Gogh, Letter to Theo van Gogh, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, between about Friday, 31 May and about Thursday, 6 June 1889, <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let777/letter.html>

If you find yourself feeling a bit like Abram on that night long ago; if you feel let down by God or lost, afraid or uncertain, look up. No matter what time of day simply, look up. If it is high noon, look up at the blue sky and know, know that the heavens are filled with stars too numerous to count. You can't see them, but you know that they are there. If you can, on one of these dark winter nights, get away from the city lights and look up. See God's handiwork in the heavens. Experience the peace that is beyond our understanding that only comes from God.

The Magi from the foreign land looked into the night sky and followed that star that led them into a backwater land and a modest dwelling. These wise men may not have understood what it all meant but they followed that star and that made all the difference in the world.

We come to this table, not sure what it all means. The table is here at Oak Grove Church where you are not. We come to this table feeling a bit odd and self-conscious. We have been taught that Communion happens when we are together not at home by ourselves. As you look at this table and prepare to be part of this, let go of worrying if this act of communion is symbolic or a reality. The Holy Spirit is like the stars that we know are up in the sky even now when we cannot see them. The Spirit is with us and we are one in Christ even when we cannot see each other. May the **peace** of God which passes all our thought and understanding be with you this day and all the days following. When you start to doubt or feel uncertain, look up! The stars proclaim it, "God is with us." Thanks be to God, amen.