

An unexpected benefit to living in rural Michigan, as we did years ago, was that there was almost no light pollution. Which meant that, on a clear night, the stars were simply breathtaking. You could see every star of the Milky Way. The entire heavens were lit up with points of light.

There were so many more stars than we see, even in our small town of Boonville. We're just too close to Columbia. Too close to the highway. Too lit up with our own street lights, house lights, and business signage. But get away from all those lights and it's amazing just how many more stars you'll actually see.

When God brought Abram outside that night in the desert, it was a sky like that. No cities, no electricity, no light pollution. Just the vast sky, completely dark. And yet also overflowing with points of light. And then God said to him, *"Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them... So shall your offspring be."*

This moment in our Old Testament lesson is not the beginning of Abram's journey of faith, but it is one of its most pivotal turning points. In fact, the Apostle Paul later points to this very verse - *"And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness"* - as a foundational statement of the Gospel: Righteousness by faith apart from works. It's the message of Christ crucified for sinners, already proclaimed centuries before Christ's birth.

To understand how deeply comforting this promise is, we need to go back and consider Abram's situation. After all, the reading begins with the words: *"After these things..."* After what things?

Back in chapter 14, Abram had just returned from rescuing his nephew Lot, who had been kidnapped during a war between rival kings. Abram had taken his men, just 318 of them, fought the army of the enemy, and won. He had refused to take any spoils of war for himself, lest anyone say that he had become rich by the strength of man rather than by the hand of God.

So he returns, victorious, but vulnerable. The kings he defeated may seek revenge. He's growing older. He has no heir. Sarai is still barren. The promise of descendants as numerous as the dust of the earth feels very far away.

So God speaks to him in a vision: *"Fear not, Abram. I am your shield; your reward shall be very great."* The battle is over, but the fear remains. I think we can relate to that. You can endure the emergency and still tremble afterward. You can come through hardship and still doubt what comes next. Sometimes facing death only makes you feel more frail and mortal, even if you survive.

And so the Lord meets Abram in the midst of his fear. But notice how Abram responds: *"O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless..."* Abram doesn't pretend. He doesn't sugarcoat his feelings. He lays it all out: "You've promised me descendants, but I don't even have one child. If I die today, my head servant Eliezer, a man who isn't even related to me, will get my inheritance. Is this your plan?"

Please realize, this isn't faithlessness. This is faith wrestling with the Word of God. Abram isn't rejecting God's promise. He's trying to understand how it could possibly come true. And this is important: Struggling to understand God's promises isn't a sign of doubt: it's a sign of faith.

The person who doubts simply walks away. He sees God's Word unfulfilled and gives up on it. God's promises seem impossible and so he dismisses them as a fairy tale. Doubt doesn't stick around to ask questions.

The person of faith stays and pleads, *"Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief."* The person of faith says, "God, you promised. Help me see how this can be." Abram's questions may be filled with frustration and sadness, but they are still questions that come from faith.

And it's for that reason that God doesn't rebuke him. Instead, God brings him outside. *"Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them."* Then comes the promise: *"So shall your offspring be."*

God doesn't explain how it will happen. He doesn't give Abram a timeline. He doesn't draw a diagram of his family tree. He simply speaks His Word. That Word creates what it says and that Word creates faith in the promises it gives.

We often quote this story to highlight how many descendants Abram would have: countless like the stars. And yes, the nation of Israel would come from him. But there's more here. In Genesis 12, God had said, *"In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."* Not just many descendants, but one particular offspring through whom blessing would come.

Paul, writing in Galatians 3, picks up on this exact theme. He writes, *"Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say 'And to offsprings,' referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is Christ."*

In other words, the stars in the sky are not just about physical descendants, but about the spiritual offspring of Abraham. Those who would be united to him through faith in Christ. In Christ, Abram would become the father of many nations, not just Israel. In Christ, Abram would bless all the families of the earth, not just his own. In Christ, Abram's offspring would be even more numerous than the people of Israel, for they would be as numerous as the whole Christian church, past, present, and future.

And then comes the key verse: *"And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness."* Abram did not earn righteousness. He did not prove himself. He simply believed the promise. He trusted that the God who had been faithful thus far would continue to be faithful.

And God counted it to him as righteousness. That word – counted – is a banking term. God took Abram's faith and placed righteousness in Abram's account. God took this tiny mustard seed of faith that Abram had in the promise of a savior and used it to pay the overwhelming debt of sin that Abram owed.

Abram lived 2000 years before Christ, but he had faith in Jesus. Because Jesus, not Isaac, is the ultimate heir to Abram, for he is the One in whom all nations are blessed. He is the Word of God made flesh, who takes up the fears of Abram, the doubts of Sarai, the sins of you and me, and bears them on the cross.

There, Jesus is not shielded. There, Jesus receives no reward. He suffers in our place, counted as sin so that we might be counted as righteous. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5, *"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."*

And now, the call comes to us just as it came to Abram: Believe the Lord. Trust His promise. Look to Christ. You may not see what you long for. You may wait for answers that don't come on your timeline. You may feel weak, small, and overlooked.

But God says to you, *"Fear not. I am your shield."* He says to you, *"Count the stars."* And in the waters of your Baptism, He says, *"You are mine."* Baptism is where God joins you to the heir of Abram, to Christ Himself. There, you are clothed with Christ, buried with Him in His death, and raised with Him in His resurrection. There, God counts you among the righteous by faith.

When Abram looked up into the night sky, he saw only points of light. But God saw what Abram couldn't: a family of faith – Jews and Gentiles, young and old, men and women, sinners and saints – all made righteous by the same promise. And one of those shining stars, seen only by the eyes of faith, was you. A child of God brought into the light of God's everlasting covenant.

So when we count the stars, we're not only remembering a long-ago promise to a man in the desert. We are rejoicing in what God still does: bringing salvation through His Word and Sacraments. We are watching God fulfill His promise one person at a time, one Baptism at a time. Until all the saints are gathered like stars shining forever in His presence. Amen.