

God intends, because we are God's beloved. We live out the promises of God, even when the universe does not yet seem to be bending toward God's justice and love.

And it's not just the theologians advising us to act our way into faith. It's the scientists, too: "The studies suggest that hope isn't simply a thermometer, reflecting the condition of the world, but a thermostat, shaping how we perceive and respond to outside events. If each of us could become a bit more hopeful, we have good reasons to expect that many aspects of our individual and collective lives would improve, even amidst, and possibly by confronting, the real challenges we face."⁷ Living with hope actually creates hope. And the good news for us is that we get to live this way, together. We get to practice hope and faith in a community that shares those values. In a place where, when our own hope is lagging, someone else's can bolster us up. In a group of people who show us what it looks like to hold onto our faith in the deathly present. God has placed us in a beloved community founded on faith and committed to hope. So we promise to support each other as we take that vulnerable, daring risk of placing our hope in God's promises.

Abram summoned his faith in God by doing these two things, too. We don't hear him pray, but he first relied on God to show him a sign of the promise. God responded by showing him the stars. Those stars were not proof of anything, really. But they were a gift, a continued bit of grace, inviting Abram to trust what God was saying. And second, he chose to live as if that promise was true. Genesis says, "Abram believed the Lord." That lived out trust set him right with God and helped him press ahead toward the promised future. At least for a while. Abram and Sarai were human; so they will try again to control the outcome of things themselves. They will have to practice faith some more, until God reveals the future God promised in a way they didn't expect. But that's what Bowler's prayer reminds us about faith. That, again and again, we need to be awed by God's presence. Again and again, we need opportunities to look up at the stars and see signs of all that God has promised. Again and again, even in the deathly present, we can dare to summon our faith in the one whose promises are strong and true.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.

1 <https://tinyurl.com/39dp64mw/>

2 Collin Cornell, "Commentary on Genesis 15:1-6, September 15, 2024," *Working Preacher*, <https://tinyurl.com/284ffjzu>

3 Brendan Case and Tyler Vanderweele, "The Power of Hope Amid an Epidemic of Despair," *Common Good Magazine*, August 1, 2024.

4 Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation*, (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 145.

5 Kate Bowler and Jessica Ritchie, *Good Enough: 40ish Devotionals for a Life of Imperfection* (New York: Convergent, 2022), 43.

6 Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation*, (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 146.

7 Case and Vanderweele.

September 15, 2024

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

"Summoning Faith"

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Genesis 15:1-6

When Abram looked up at the stars in the sky, I am sure he could *not* count them all. In his time, there would have been no light pollution; just dark skies everywhere you looked. So he must have seen the vastness of the heavens; innumerable stars dancing in the sky, twinkling with brilliant light.

In our time, the images coming back to earth from the James Webb Space Telescope show those same dancing, twinkling stars. The telescope can see so deeply into space, so far back into time with its infrared light detection, that its pictures reveal an almost incomprehensible universe. Everything scientists are learning shows that there is more and more stuff out there than we ever knew. One, single picture of the dense core of our own Milky Way galaxy depicts an estimated 500,000 individual stars.¹ And that's just one part of *this particular* galaxy. Other images show that the early universe included more galaxies than any scientific model has ever shown; like, a massive number of galaxies, each saucer-shaped one tilting on the black background like a sci-fi movie image; except these are real. On our own, at least, we cannot count those innumerable galaxies and stars. All we can do is take in the enormity of the universe. We can feel ourselves in awe of the magnitude of creation and our opportunity to be a part of it.

The vastness of the stars was the sign of hope God offered Abram. A few chapters back, God had called Abram and Sarai. God promised to use them to build God's beloved community on earth. They were to be the starting point of this group of people who would be blessed and who would be a blessing to others. But so far, this promise felt like it was going nowhere. Abram and Sarai wanted to believe God, but there was little evidence that what God had said could possibly be true. The promise felt suspended, delayed, put on hold—maybe forever.

Abram and Sarai would be the first, but certainly not the last, to question whether the promises of God could really be true. There was doubt and fear mixed up with the growing faith Sarai and Abram were tending. So even though God needed no help in making the promise of a child and a growing community come to fruition, they tried to help God along. Abram tried to

throw God a bone. “Don’t worry, I’ve got a guy. His name is Eliezer, from Damascus. My people conquered his people and now he’s part of my household. He can stand in for a son of my own. He can be heir. I’m sure this can be the solution.” As commentator Collin Cornell writes, “Delay, irresolution, fear—the[se] inspire[d] Abram to propose an alternative, a workaround, a concession. If the grand promise of a successor remains far off, some real if diminished possibilities lie within reach.”²

It’s easy for us to poke fun at Abram’s workaround; to dismiss his idea of this man standing in for a son as ridiculous. But we do this kind of thing all the time. We create our own stories, our own plans, and we try to fit them into God’s story. And often, we work hard trying to be in control, so things go the way we are sure God intends them to, or at least the way we want them to. Because when things don’t go right, or when our prayers don’t seem to be working, or when it feels like we’ve been abandoned by God, what will we do then? How will we manage the disappointment? Won’t we look like fools if that happens!? So we do everything we can to guard against that embarrassment and pain.

Kendall Vanderslice has a ministry called Edible Theology. She writes about baking and how it reveals something of God in Christ to us. Over the past few years she tried to launch a new part of her ministry, called the Bread Shed—a little bakery in her backyard. But despite every bit of her discernment pointing toward this being God’s promise to her, the permits for her bakery were, in the end, denied. The promise didn’t seem to be taking shape. And she could not believe it. Vanderslice writes, “At the root of my pain, I came to realize, was embarrassment that I had dared to allow myself to hope...Even worse, I ha[d] hoped in public. How could I allow myself to be so vulnerable as to hope like that once again?”

Maybe Abram was worried about feeling that kind of pain and embarrassment if he and Sarai never had a child. Maybe that was why he was trying to work things out on his own. Surely he would feel bereft if the community God promised never came to be. It is a vulnerable thing to trust in God, when we can’t fully see where God is leading us. It is a daring thing to put our faith in a God whose purposes we cannot fully understand. It is a risk to hope in God, instead of managing every last detail of life ourselves.

And yet, it is an even greater risk to live without that hope. In 2015, economists began reporting on “deaths of despair.” These were deaths caused by tangible things like drug overdoses, suicide, and alcohol poisoning. Though the economists said they were actually caused by hopelessness; by the loss of a way of life, which especially affected less educated men. Years later, this situation has not improved, and adolescents have joined the ranks of those who are suffering. In 2021, 42% of high school students reported consistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness.³ The world we live in—gun violence,

division, inequities—makes the promises we make to youth about their lives seem delayed, suspended, on hold. They are finding it hard to summon faith in anything, and that loss is taking a toll.

This story of Abram and Sarai does not make it easier to find that faith, when a promise feels delayed. But it illustrates that it is *possible* for hope and faith to dwell within us, even when all signs point otherwise. As Old Testament scholar Water Brueggemann writes, “The text announces [what it] means to... trust God’s future and to live assured of that future even in the deathly present.”⁴ To trust that future means to see the deathly present for what it is, not just for ourselves, but in the broken world around us. But to see the enormity of the stars at the very same time. To remember what the symbol of those stars means: that the present is not the only reality. That God promises something different, something whole, something beautiful. And just because you and I cannot fully understand it or grasp it right now, does mean that we cannot trust in it. We are invited to put our faith in something bigger than just ourselves, in someone who can do greater things than we ever could. Finding that faith in God’s future—both a future here on earth and maybe one beyond—leads us into a daring kind of hope. But how? How do we find that faith that in the midst of the deathly present?

I think there are only two ways to summon that faith and find that hope. The first is to ask God to give it to us. We Presbyterians believe faith is more than just our best efforts. It is more than a good choice we make to believe in God. Faith is the very gift of God. Faith is the Spirit working in our lives, nudging us toward trust, kindling hope within us. And so we can ask God to help us overcome our fear, to get past the potential for pain and embarrassment if things fall apart. As the Christian writer and podcaster Kate Bowler writes in her “Prayer for When God Seems Absent,” in our quest for faith, we can pray to God these words: “May we learn to trust that You aren’t asleep on the job. That you haven’t forgotten us. That you are as near to us as our very breath. Give us the courage to press on. To suffer with hope that You have overcome the world. May again and again we be awed by Your presence. That even when we feel like we’ve hit rock bottom, may we recognize we have fallen into Your arms because there is no place so deep or so dark or so scary that Your presence cannot reach.”⁵

The second way to summon that faith and hope in God is to live it. To anticipate the promises of wholeness God offers. To teach our children, to live our lives, to vote, to speak, as if those promises are true, even when we still have some doubts. As Brueggemann advises, human “works keep faith possible. [A]cting out of the conviction of the promise is in fact a bodily, incarnated way of enacting the promise.”⁶ So we treat others with the dignity due to all who are made in God’s image, even when they don’t seem to be deserving of it. We care for our own bodies and hearts with the gentleness