

We have just heard the Gospel of the Lord, read in the middle of the church, in words we hear and understand. We hear the Gospel read in this fashion every Sunday, but most Sundays we do not remember the great legacy which made this practice central to our worship. On this Sunday—the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation—we ought to remember and give thanks for those reformers who gave their lives so that all the people of God could hear the Gospel of salvation by faith alone, by grace alone, in Christ alone.

Anglicans are sons and daughters of this Reformation. We can affirm the Reformation motto of the Church—*semper reformanda*—always reforming. Yet we pray that the Church would be reformed and thus healed into a greater unity with all baptized Christians and churches. We pray that the Scriptures would reform *us*—our hearts, our habits, our very lives, so that we would be *conformed* to the image of Jesus.

It has been said that the Church undergoes dramatic change every 500 years. If you read Christian history, you will find that summary accurate with the record of events. Which means that we presently find ourselves in a time of dramatic change. As daughters and sons of this Reformation, belonging to the Church catholic that is always reforming, we seek to be conformed to Christ by acquiring his virtues, his very character. For even in these times of great cultural change, we cling to the Scriptures, we look to the witness of the saints, and we pray that the Word of God would become flesh in our lives.

So with gratitude for this legacy in mind, we turn to the story of one promised to become ‘the father of many nations’—Abraham. And in Abraham we seek a witness of hope—hope that renews the world.

Please return to Genesis 15.1-6 on pg. [ ] of your pew Bible. While you’re finding that passage, I want to give some vital background to Abraham’s story, recorded in Genesis 12-14. When we meet Abraham in Genesis, we meet him as Abram, the son of Terah. When we meet Abram, his world is ending. For reasons unknown to us, Terah uproots his family from their

home city, Ur of the Chaldees, modern-day Iraq. Abram and Sarai follow Terah's lead all the way to a city called Haran. Haran was halfway between Canaan and Ur. And there in Haran, Terah dies.

Soon after his father dies, Abram hears a voice—the voice of the Lord. This is not the god his father, Terah, worshipped. Abram grew up worshipping Chaldean gods. But now he hears the voice of the God who created the universe. This God—the only true God—says to Abram, 'Go from your country, your family, and your father's household, and come to the land I will show you. I will bless you there and through you I will bless all families on earth<sup>1</sup>.'

The promise is great, but this is no small journey. Abram is 75 years old. His father has just passed, he's childless, and he's going to a foreign land. God calls Abram onward just after Abram's world has ended. /

When Abram and Sarai arrive in Canaan, we want to see this aging and courageous couple settling into their new home. We want to see their bright future beginning. I'm reminded of the year I lived in northern England. In the first few months, everyone asked me, 'Are you settled yet?' There was one church member, a lady called Jean, who was particularly concerned that I was getting settled. Every time I saw Jean in the course of the year, she would ask me, 'Are you getting settled?' With only a few months remaining in my stay, Jean was still inquiring about how I was settling in. I didn't have the heart to say, 'Jean, I've just boxed up all my earthly belongings to go back to America. I was settled, the manse was quite comfortable these 11 months, but all my stuff is now on a boat.'

When Abram and Sarai arrive in Canaan, they are only passing through themselves. They come to a Canaanite town called Hebron and God says, 'I will give this land to your descendants one day.' The Lord says these words to a childless Abram. Then a famine sweeps through Canaan. Onward to Egypt, Abram and Sarai go. That's where food will be found.

After the sojourn in Egypt and some dicey moments there, Abram and Sarai head north again, eventually 'settling in' once more at Hebron. But they can't really settle in because Hebron is a war-zone. Four kings battle

five other Canaanite kings. This battle has nothing to do with Abram. But it becomes a problem for Abram when one of the raiders kidnaps his nephew, Lot.

Then Abram must organize his tribe for battle to rescue Lot. That rescue campaign is successful and earns Abram the favor of King Melchizedek.

It's a lengthy, but vital, prologue to our reading. When Genesis 15 opens with 'After these things...' now you see what 'those things' are: his father's death, a mysterious promise, a long sojourn, famine, war, kidnapping, and a rescue mission. Yet after all these things, Abram remains childless. God told him at Hebron, 'This land I will give to your descendants.' He said, 'Look, north, south, east, and west. If you can count the grains of dust in all directions, that will be the number of your descendants.' Abram had heard the promise before, more than once. But never mind countless descendants—Abram does not have the one.

Yet the Lord meets Abram in a vision: 'Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be great.' Notice what happens when God said, "Fear not." Abram responds with a question, "Lord, what will you give me, for I continue childless?" Look at the footnote in your Bible. An alternate translation suggests Abram may have said, 'I shall die childless.' Abram has seen his world end before. It happened at Haran, when his father, Terah, died. But Abram sees his world ending again and there's much more at stake this time.

There's a simple detail in this episode, so simple that we might miss it and deem it insignificant. This encounter happens at nighttime. Or more precisely, at dusk. We know that because the Lord directs Abram's vision to the stars in the sky. More on that in a moment.

But look beyond our reading to verse 12: 'As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, great and dreadful darkness fell upon him.' Yes, Abram's world is ending, again. He's entering the dark night of the soul. In fact, Abram is the *pioneer* of the dark night of the soul.

And as Abram's world seems to end—I shall die childless; as the sun

goes down; as terror fills his soul; *that* is the moment God calls Abram to hope. //

When does hope begin? You don't need hope in the daylight. If you see the way forward; if you know where you ought to go; if you control your destiny; you need hope about like you need a flashlight at noonday. That's the Apostle Paul: 'Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?'

Abram stares into the impossible, facing the dark night of the soul. That's when hope begins. When you have lost all coordinates; when you cannot navigate the way forward; when you feel your life, your soul threatened and your world is ending, that is when God speaks his hope. *If faith is trusting God in the daylight hours of your life, hope is trusting God in the night hours of your life. [Repeat?]*

"Abram, I've asked you to count the dust of Canaan, but that was in the daytime. It's nighttime now. Come outside. 'Count the stars.' And then, God says, *if you are able to count them*. It's like God is being a bit playful with Abram.

Abram is supposed to number the stars with his naked eye. He's not an astronomer. This isn't a fair challenge. He pre-dates the Hubble Telescope by roughly 7000 years. Even with our advanced technology, we can't count the stars.

The astronomer, David Kornreich, established a service at Cornell University called 'Ask an Astronomer.' Someone asked him how astronomers count the stars. To which he replied, 'I don't know the answer because I don't know if the universe is infinitely large or not<sup>2</sup>.' Well, there's a lot of theology in that answer, Dr. Kornreich! Another space mission called Gaia, launched in 2013, set out map all the known stars just in the Milky Way. That would number 1 billion, but astronomers suspect that the number could be as high as 100 billion. Again, 'I don't know the answer' is an excellent, theological answer. /

It seems God speaks through a wry smile when he says, 'So shall your offspring be.' You can't fathom the fathoms, Abram. But you know *me*. /

have called *you* by name. You *will* be a father of many nations, Abram. So on this dark night, with your head bowed in sorrow, fearing your death, lift up your eyes. Find your hope in Me.'

In Abraham's exchange with God, we see a key truth about hope—hope does not exist outside of relationship. Hope cannot exist in a vague, abstract vacuum. Hope is not an idea circulating in the ether. Hope is a Person—the God of Abraham. And the God of Abraham is the God who created the heavens and the earth. He made the world beautiful and he's committed to redeeming his good world from her sin and brokenness. God in heaven is the ground and guarantee of Abraham's hope. Any other hope outside of that relationship will eventually meet its end.

I think that's what Paul means when he reflects on Abraham's faith, that Abraham believed the Lord and the Lord counted it to him as righteousness. In Romans 4, Paul said that 'In hope [Abraham] believed *against* hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, 'So shall your offspring be.'

In other words, Abraham had a human hope, but that hope died. Human hope places faith in good weather, favorable circumstances. Human hope finds confidence based on what we control, our skills, our talents, our grit and ability to endure hardship. But that was not Abraham's hope. When he looked at the promise of fatherhood as 100 year old man, his human hope died. But Abraham did not lose hope when his human hope died. Why? Because God called Abraham and said, 'I will be your God.' Abraham could hold a *divine* hope against a *human* hope because he knew the Lord, he trusted the Lord.

And the same is true for you and me, my brother and sister. Hope is relational; hope is communal. The hopes and dreams I carry in my heart may be deep and strong, but they probably aren't strong enough. When my human hope dies; when I enter the dark night of the soul, that is when I discover there *is* a hope against a hope. And his Name is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I don't have to always be the strong one. Sometimes I simply

need to be in relationship with another saint who holds onto hope for me, who believes when I can't believe, who prays for me in the night seasons of my life.

In his poem *2047 Grace Street*, Christian Wiman wrote: *I do not know how to come closer to God/ except by standing where a world is ending/ for one man.*<sup>3</sup> From 2002-2003, I was a man—a young man—who was standing in a place where his world was ending. In 2002, I transferred seminaries from Asbury to Duke Divinity School. It was the right decision, but it was a hard decision. I left behind dear friends, moved to a place where I had only one friend.

In that first year, I totally lost my bearings. I felt alone. I wasn't inspired by theology that used to energize me. I found no comfort in worship. My world was ending, because this was the first experience I had with depression. I was 23 and I didn't know something could flatten you like that. I felt crippled not just by depression, but anxiety, too. A lovely combination.

I still battled depression in my final year at Duke, but things were improving some. You know what did give me energy? Mount Level Missionary Baptist. I was one of 4-5 white dudes in this vibrant African-American Church. I loved the liturgy of Mount Level Missionary Baptist Church. It's not a overt liturgy like ours, but there's a rhythm to every service.

In their Sunday liturgy, it was common that you'd have prayer ministry at the altar. You didn't have a few people come forward for prayer. Eighty percent of the church crowded around the altar. Whoever crowded next to you was your prayer minister.

One Sunday I went forward and found a lovely woman about my mother's age who offered to pray for me. I don't remember what I said or even the words she prayed over me. What mattered is that she prayed with boldness and hope.

The next Sunday I was walking into Mount Level Missionary Baptist Church, head down, but in my peripheral vision, I notice my new prayer mother approaching too. Her head's down, too. I don't think she sees me.

Then all the sudden, I hear this voice behind me say, 'Well has he made your crooked places straight?' I said, 'Not entirely, ma'am, but they are straightening out. Please keep praying for me.' She said, 'I will.' /

I can't tell you the moment that depression lifted—and it did—but I can tell you when I began to 'hope against hope.' It was the moment a loving and bold woman of God prayed over me when I couldn't pray for myself. I needed someone who was a witness of hope. Somewhere along the way she acquired a hope stronger than death and she prayed it over me.

You know how hope renews the world? Again, Christian Wiman: '*I do not know how to come closer to God/ except by standing where a world is ending/ for one man.*'<sup>4</sup> [Woman]. Oh, I want Apostles to be a church that hopes against hope. And that means we walk in hope with one another through the dark night of the soul. And that means we have a special calling to pray for people who cannot pray. It means drawing near to God in the place where a world is ending for one woman, one man.

Just sit beside someone who needs the hope of Christ. You do not need to say many words, if any at all. And in that place where human hope has met its end, lift up your eyes to the heaven. Look into the same sky Abraham behold. Your naked eye can't see all there is to see. But in that ancient sky there are stars shines resembling you, resembling me, resembling all who call on the Name of Abraham's greatest son, Jesus Christ. You see, the whole night sky is a story, an open book, that God's promise is true. Hope renews the world, but better still, hope in God renews all creation unto ages of ages. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> Paraphrase Genesis 12.1-4

<sup>2</sup> "How Many Stars Are in the Universe?" <https://www.space.com/26078-how-many-stars-are-there.html>

<sup>3</sup> Christian Wiman, "2047 Grace Street"

<sup>4</sup> Christian Wiman, "2047 Grace Street"