

**Genesis 15; Psalm 27; Luke 13**

There's a story about a man who went into the bus station in Athens, Georgia to buy a ticket to Greenville, SC. The ticket clerk told him that the bus would be a little late. While he was waiting he thought he would walk around the station, take a look at things. He came upon a machine that advertised, *"I will tell you your name, your age, your hometown, and other interesting information."* Curious and somewhat skeptical, the man got a quarter out of his pocket, and put it into the machine. A card came out of the slot. It read: *"Your name is Bill Jones. You are 35 years of age. You live in Athens, GA. You are waiting for a bus to Greenville, SC. The bus is delayed."* He was amazed. The machine did exactly what it said it would. This couldn't be possible. The man reached into his pocket, got out another quarter, put it into the machine. Pretty soon another card came out saying. *"Your name is Bill Jones. You are 35 years of age. You live in Athens, GA. You are waiting for a bus to Greenville, SC. The bus is delayed a little longer."* It was incredible. Now the man was really fascinated. He thought, *"I'm going to stump this machine."* He went out of the station, across the street to a five and dime store. He bought one of those Groucho Marx glasses with the eyebrows and mustache, along with some fake ears, a wig, and a cane. Hobbling back into the station, he approached the machine and inserted a quarter. Out came the card. *"Your name is Bill Jones. You are 35 years of age. You live in Athens, GA. You are still waiting for a bus to Greenville, SC. While you were horsing around, the bus came and left."*

Abraham and Sarah, our ancestors in faith, give us the story of waiting – waiting for God's promises to come true. Of course, his name isn't Abraham yet; it's still Abram. Here in Genesis 15, God is telling Abram for the 4th time, that he is going to have lots of descendants. And God keeps promising Abram land. In other words, God promises Abram a future. He and his elderly wife, Sarai, are what they used to call "barren." In that culture that meant a lot more than just "childless." Children represented much more than someone to love and care for, or to delight in. One was saved through one's children, and by the land one possessed. It signified a healthy relationship with God. What difference would the promise of land make if there were no children to inherit it? The absence of children produced anxiety, fear, and disappointment for Abraham and Sarah.

But what happens when those promises are delayed and nothing has happened? No kids. No land. Just a vague promise and empty heartache. Even the 4th time, he just doesn't see how all this is going to work. When the promises of God are delayed, our first instinct is to take matters into our own hands, settle for something less and seek an alternative future. Abraham resigns himself that his servant, Eliezer will inherit his wealth – and he is a wealthy man. For her part, Sarah arranges for a surrogate mother in her maidservant Hagar. Abraham jeopardizes the promise twice by claiming Sarah is his sister rather than his wife in order to save his own skin.

Abram is anxious. So God takes Abram by the hand, and says, *"Abram, trust me. Look up at the stars. Remember how I've been telling you that you will have land, a home, and children & grandchildren and a future far beyond anything you can imagine? Trust me. Don't be afraid. I've got a plan, and you're in it. You can't begin to count these stars, can you, and you can't begin to count the blessings – and to be honest, the trials – that the future will bring. But there will be a future for you, and I will be with you every step of the way."* The story says that Abram "believed" God. Then God makes a promise to Abram, a covenant, the covenant that said to Abram, and says to us, that God has us covered. This life – it's a trust walk. And we don't have to fear.

I'm living my life years later and thousands of miles away from this story between God and Abram, but like Abram, I've done my share of worrying about the future. I complain and question God, and I start taking matters into my own hands because, secretly, I think it's *really* up to me. I argue with God. I find the "trust and relax" part difficult, relying on God to take care of that future.

The covenant says, "Don't be afraid, trust me, I'm here, and I'm in charge of the future." The covenant says, "Look up at the stars, and look at your life, with different eyes. God's challenge to count the stars is not an exercise in science or math, although some have tried it. Seventy sextillion (7 followed by 22 zeros) is one count according to star gazers at the Australian National University in 2003. The Aussies claim this is ten times as many stars as grains of sand on all the world's beaches and deserts. See the miracles that surround you each day – these are gifts from me. When you recognize the gifts as good, you can trust the giver." We don't need to be anxious, because no matter what things may look like on the surface or at the moment, God is at work beneath it all, and God is good – not just some of the time, but all the time.

Like me, you may struggle with this kind of theology that seems far too superficial, and doesn't begin to address suffering in the world. It definitely doesn't answer questions like AIDS or the Holocaust, the genocide in Rwanda, or the earthquake in Haiti just last month, or the earthquake in Chile yesterday. And yet, this story roots us in the promises of a God, not only of our spiritual past, but also of our future, who is our primary resource for strength, wisdom, courage, and love – a love that can face anything and triumph in the end.

We hear the ancient story of who we are and where we came from. Lent is a good time to reflect on the empty places, the barren places, of our lives, to think about some of our doubts and questions and worries, and then to move through them, even if it's a struggle, to move to a new place, a new way of being in relationship with God, of trusting in God. God is doing a new thing, and we long for it to be so, in spite of evidence to the contrary: war, sickness, poverty, hunger, homelessness, new threats like terrorism and global warming, not to mention an anxiety-driven economic crisis. There is so much to fear, and so little to count on.

So the words, "Do not be afraid, I am your shield," fall upon our ears and our hearts like a healing balm that strengthens us for the living of our lives. Sometimes, you just have to go outside and look up at the stars and remember that the God who flung them across the night sky also knit each one of us together in our mother's womb...this God has got us covered, and can be trusted now and in a future we cannot even begin to imagine.