

“Look up!”

Sermon on Sunday, March 13, 2022

Dear church,

Last Sunday we had a visitor here at church. Sally Bishop, the local artist who is displaying her photography on our art wall, came to church, hosted a little reception and shared pretzels with some of our children. I asked her about the photos with the unusual colors. A few of them look almost like impressionist paintings. “Did you use a special lens?” I asked her. And she said, “No, it’s mostly just looking and seeing what’s there.” I kind of knew that already. Over the years I have taken pictures of the art that nature creates. Sometimes the sun makes beautiful impressions as she evokes unusual colors on ordinary trees and grasses. You can capture it with a simple cell phone camera. But I also take Sally Bishop’s words as a commentary about our lives, our ability to recognize the sacred among us, around us, in us, above us. “You just have to look,” she said. Do we see what’s there?

Sometimes people ask why God doesn’t speak to us anymore. Why indeed? It seemed so common in the Old Testament. And God spoke to Abram, “Get up and go from your country to a place that I will show you...” That’s the beginning of the Abram cycle. And in today’s text from Genesis, God says, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” At every important juncture in the Abram cycle there is divine direction. Couldn’t we use that right now? Yes, we could. But why is God so quiet with us? Is it maybe because we have created a world which tends to be materialistic and machine-driven, with little room for the poetry of the soul? God still speaks, I believe, it’s just that we’ve lost some of our ability to hear and see. “If you don’t use it, you will lose it,” people say about many of our skills, including languages. Maybe we can recover some of our ability to hear and interpret God’s language as we look into our world and contemplate the good, the bad and the ugly. Let us attempt to extend our antennas during this Lenten season and detect the voice we’ve drowned out so successfully, the voice of the Lord.

Abram came to the Lord at a low point in his life. He was discouraged. None of the things he hoped for had materialized. He had no natural descendant. The Promised Land was out of sight. He may have felt cheated, duped, misled by God. He doesn't say so openly - he was a polite man, but hadn't God promised him a bright future? Hadn't he asked him to leave his family support system behind, travel hundreds of miles along the fertile crescent of greater Mesopotamia, and for what? Some pipe dream? We enter the story cycle at a point when the main protagonist begins to question everything. But what is most impressive in today's passage is Abram's ability to communicate. What we find in this ancient text is an intimate conversation between the creator and one of his beloved creatures. They speak to one another as good friends, as confidants.

More than a thousand years later, Paul would remind his Jewish brothers and sisters of Abram's faith and his ability to speak with God like a friend rather than a remote enforcer of rigid laws. He said, "Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.'" (Galatians 4:6) Jesus, famously, had a most intimate relationship with God, and that ability to communicate helped even Jesus in times of doubt. Faith is never about your certainties in beliefs; it is always about a trusting, honest and vulnerable relationship with the one who accompanies us on our journey of life, who calls us his children, who cares about us. "Abram believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness." Notice that this doesn't say, Abram believed in the Immaculate Conception of his future son by his aging wife! Or in the reality of the Promised Land or any other thing or concept. No, he simply believed the Lord, Genesis says. It's a trust thing.

I imagine that we have all had difficult conversations, full of doubt, vulnerability and raw emotions at various junctures of life. Who did we speak to at those points? It may have been during a divorce or a major loss or something you messed up pretty badly. In know who you spoke to. You spoke to people you trusted, people who wouldn't judge you, people who might disagree with some of your choices and some your thoughts perhaps, but who would still listen and try to understand. We all need people like that, they can be

life savers. The most amazing aspect of this old story cycle of Abram is that the person he trusted most and had those types of conversations with was someone invisible, was God. And when God said to him, "Look up at the sky and count the stars, that's how numerous your offspring will be," Abram looked and he believed. It was a trust thing. One of Abram's descendants in our day is the Ukrainian President Zelenskyi. He is showing us faith in action when it counts most, that is, when we're in a crisis. He is looking up, and he is not just counting the Russian warplanes in the sky. He is looking further into the future of his people. And he believes. At a time when we have many reasons to look down, let us look up and believe in God. It's a trust thing.

Amen.