

“The Sky’s the Limit”  
Sermon by Oby Ballinger  
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Edina Morningside Community Church; September 18, 2016

**Genesis 15:1-8**

*After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.”*

*But Abram said, “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” And Abram said, “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” But the word of the Lord came to him, “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.” He brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.*

Am I the only one who gets around to reading the Sunday paper on the following Thursday? So it was that on Thursday morning I saw a [little book review](#) in the business section of last Sunday’s Star Tribune. The new book *Progress* by Johan Norberg makes the case that, despite headlines and assumptions to the contrary, things are much better for human beings than they have ever been before. Poverty rates globally have been cut in half over the last twenty years. Two hundred years ago, almost 95% of people lived on less than \$2 a day (in current dollars). That global poverty rate was at 37 percent in 1990, and below 10 percent in 2015. Furthermore, medical advancements continue at such a pace that even pandemics which would have crippled the globe a generation ago are now handled before they become catastrophic. The reviewer concludes that “not only have people grown much more prosperous; they also enjoy better health than even rich folks did in the past.”

Why is it that despite the armloads of evidence to the contrary, people still feel like the world is going you-know-where in a handbasket? There are many possible answers, but one reason is that people have a tendency to remember the bad and forget the good. Our minds fixate on times when we’ve experienced pain, humiliation or loss, while joyful or satisfying times are more fleeting and difficult to recall. This is why I’ve heard it said that human beings need something like ten compliments to balance out just one negative comment we receive. This is also why good news gets buried in what feels like an avalanche of negative headlines, and we might believe that the world has never been so troubled. Church is one powerful antidote to this tendency, a community where we come together to count our blessings and recall God’s goodness, even despite the troubles that abound in the world.

Still, we get caught sometimes counting our sorrows, like Abram at the beginning of today’s Scripture. Here’s a man who, with his wife Sarai, started out as a nobody from nowhere. They heard a call from a God they did not know, and even in their seventies and eighties they answered the invitation to follow where God would lead them. God promised to watch over this couple, and to make of them a great nation, to be a blessing for all the world. That promise of land and possessions has come true—Abram and Sarai are fabulously well-off. They live at peace with their neighbors, have more animals than a person could count, and even hear the voice of God directly! Yet Abram spends his days perseverating on the one part of God’s promise that has yet to come true: children. He tells God: you could bless me a thousand times over, but without children it’s all for nothing. Despite all that he’s received from God, Abram feels betrayed: “You have given me no children!” God’s commitment to bless Abram and Sarai, to make of them a great nation, seems like a hollow promise.

And so, do you see what Abram is prepared to do? He figures that if God isn’t going to give him an heir, he’ll take matters into his own hand. [Rolf Jacobson from Luther Seminary suggests](#) that Abram has decided to get pragmatic in his old age. Someone will need to inherit what he and Sarai have built. He

needs to put *somebody* in the “beneficiary” line of the last will and testament. Pragmatically, he’s decided that the best possible future is one where his longtime servant Eliezar will be their heir. God’s promises are out the window, and Abram knows what’s best now.

Where are we, like Abram, struggling to trust in God, and trying to manufacture our own guarantees instead? Worry that investments and savings will run out can have us up all hours of the day and night, obsessing over every move of the stock market. Fear that we’re falling behind has us shelling out top dollar for the latest name brand car, shoes, or electronics so that our status will be secure. If only we would study for three more hours, then the schoolwork would come easily and we’d pass the test, guaranteed. Sadness about family members being so far away leads us to believe everything would be better if only we lived closer. (Or the stress of family members being so close leads us to believe everything would be better if only we lived farther away!) Political leaders try to convince us that if we just elect them, all our problems will go away. In my own case, I can start to believe that if I can just get the right books on my office shelves, if I can just sort through these files and those boxes, if I can answer every email promptly, then I’ll be a successful pastor.

Notice who’s the subject in all these statements? It’s “I”, “me”, “us” and “we”. The frenzied desire for guarantees that we ourselves would manufacture crowds out any trust in God’s providential wisdom. What looks at first like pragmatism quickly turns into idolatry, and we start to believe that we *alone* can fix what ails our world.

When those times come up for you and for me, today’s Scripture encourages a different path. Then especially, God comes alongside us and pulls us gently outside, under the nighttime sky. “Look up!” God says. “Look at the million, million stars in the sky! Can you count them, or is it beyond your ability? Let *me* handle it, then. I, the creator of all those stars, am still at work in the universe! Even if you don’t see my blessings because you’re focused on what’s missing, and even if I’m not operating on your timeline, trust that my promises are trustworthy and true.”

This is where God invites us to hold fast to faith, even when we’re tempted to let fear have us grasping for our own solutions. Abram doesn’t get to decide which parts of the promise are reliable or not. “That promise is not captive to Abraham’s imagination,” [Rolf Jacobson says](#), “but it pulls Abraham outside of himself. That’s the life of faith, living in those promises....We trust and we walk daily by faith, because this is the promising God who has grasped us.” Or in the imagery of a [Scandinavian proverb](#): “Faith is a bird that feels dawn breaking and sings while it is still dark.”

Let us pray: *Guide us, trustworthy God, to rely on you even when we cannot see the answer to all our prayers. Give us the faith of birds, carried on unseen air and singing in the dark. Give us the courage of swimmers, held up by water when they lie back and rest. Lead us, likewise, to let go and float into your deep embrace. Amen.* (Imagery from Denise Levertov’s poem, “[The Avowal](#)”.)