

The Rev. Jason Churchill
August 7, 2016

Forward in Faith

Could your faith give you descendants in the amount of the stars that grace our skies at night? Could you even begin to imagine what God was asking of Abram? "Do not be afraid, for I am your shield and your reward shall be great."

Abram, after receiving a call from God to literally "get up and go from your homeland and your kindred," has been traveling through the desert with his wife - a nomad without a home.

Abram and Sari traversed the desert, crossed rivers and streams, suffered the unforgiving conditions, traveling well into their 90's.

Every day, every moment, Abram went forward in faith - in the faith he had in a God that was not his own, a God that was not of his tradition...a God of the Hebrew people, a God that adopted Abram as his own - granting him a chance to be that father of the nations.

And then, one night, a travel and aged weary Abram has a dream - "Do not be afraid, for I am your shield." "Look up Abram, look up to the skies and try to count the stars if you can."

"And I, your Lord God, will fulfill my promise to you and give you descendants to number the stars."

Well, I do not know about you, but I would be a bit stunned here. 90 years old and here Abram is being told by God that he and his wife of roughly the same age will finally have a child.

How amazing, how extraordinary...how almost unreal to hear this message.

But God said - look toward heaven - count the stars if you can - and so shall be your offspring.

And he believed...he believed in God. Abram believed...in all that God promised.

One of the clergy members of St Paul's Cathedral in London said that "art is but one way to make the invisible visible. To express and explore the confusing current of who we are in this world."

Art, of which architecture plays an important role, is making the invisible visible.

Architecture and art have a way to take invisible things - like our faith - and make them visible. Our confusing current, of which we are caught up in, is pulling and dragging us around a world that seems to be spinning out of control and completely chaotic.

It's not as quiet or remote as the deserts of Abram and Sari where we can get a clear view of the peaceful cosmos that Abram look towards to understand the promise of God.

But it's there in the cosmos - in the stars of night - in the peace of evening that Abram believed in God. Abram's faith became whole and in it he would be building a nation in which we stand on yet today.

How do we find faith like Abram. Can we look to the cosmos and see the stillness of the skies, the glory of God, and the promise of grace?

"Art and architecture is but one way to make the invisible visible."

Look up to heaven - and allow me to draw your attention to the cosmos.

(The assembly was invited to look above the altar to the painted stars)

To the stars that set above us each and every time we come to this altar, to this sanctuary, to this home.



In church architecture it is permissible to use the spaces above us to also represent things that have happened in the history of our salvation.

Just like the night that was over the earth when it was a formless void, God called the sun and moon and stars into being and said that they were good.

Throughout the Bible we read of the night sky and how it reaches to the highest heaven, and how stars are our guiding lights when the sun is away.

It was in the night, shrouded by darkness and guided by the small amount of light from the stars that:

Abram found faith.

Mary was visited by an angel.

The wise men traveled to the manger.

Nicodemus visited Jesus.

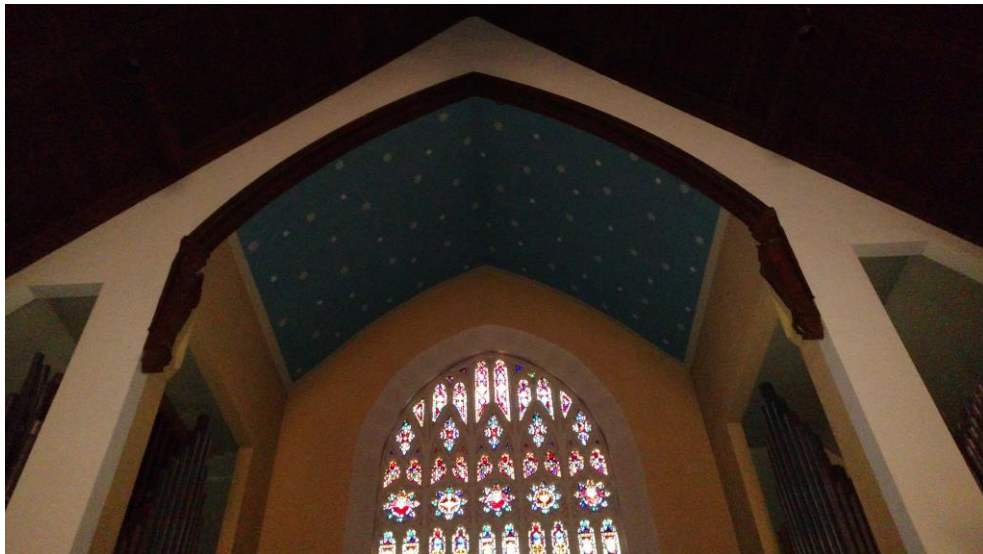
Peter denied Christ.

And many more stories that bring us an understanding of our faith.

A painting on the ceiling.

Art, the power of making the invisible visible.

Above us rises the night sky with the hopes and dreams we all have in our silent and invisible faith, made visible for all of us to see - a testament of the faithful witnesses that have passed through our church and lived and dwelled amongst us. Reminding us that in our faith we too have promises as large as Abram's.



“Do not be afraid” God says.

We have a way to try to orient ourselves and our world to fit the demands of humanity. We like to make things neat and easy to follow - yet we tend to make a mess of things and our world. I don't have to lament with you about all that is wrong with the world, but I can only stand here and offer you one thing, and that is the promise of God: to NOT BE AFRAID.

Do not be afraid little flock - are the words of Jesus in the Gospel today - for it is the Father's good will to give you the kingdom.

Like Abram, we too are given a promise that amounts to the extraordinary promise of descendants numbering the stars in the sky.

In this confusing current of who we are, God is about to change something - for Abram, for the disciples, AND for us here at St. Stephen's! And God's assurance is just this:

"Do not be afraid" because God WILL turn the world upside down and inside out so that it reorients itself, not in line to what human demands are, but in line to what God's desire is. While change will happen, and will feel like death at times, it is in reality resurrection. It is the raising up out of the woes of yesterday into the brilliance of tomorrow. It takes the invisible pains that have cause us trouble and gives us visible reassurance in the cross of Christ that we are going to be resurrected here on earth to do the work that is set before us.

Like the stars that rise above us in the sanctuary every Sunday, the invisible promise of God is made visible - just as it was for Abram.

Through his faith in God, Abram became the father of the nations.

But what does it mean that Abram would be the father of all Nations?

As the story continues and Abram follows through on God's desires and continues to show his faith, Abram and Sarai get a new name. Abraham and Sarah the two elders of our faith.

But Abraham is so much more than just the father of the Christian faith. Perhaps you've heard the term Abrahamic Faiths. It is a term that refers to the three faiths that can find their lineage all the way back to Abraham and the promise that God made with him to make descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky.

A young author named Bruce Feiler set out on a quest to discover the roots of the man Abraham and the history of which we are all part of.

He writes:

Once inside the walls of Jerusalem, the stream divides. Christians turn north. Today is the last Friday before Christmas and this afternoon monks will lead a somber procession carrying crosses down the Via Dolorosa. Jews turn South. Today is the last Friday of Hanukkah and at sunset rabbis will hold a jubilant ceremony lighting six candles at the Western Wall. Muslims turn East today is the last Friday of Ramadan and at noon clerics will hold a massive prayer service with 200,000 bending as one.

Jerusalem is a touchstone of faith and has been since before time began. The legends of monotheistic religions are clear: before there was time, there was water and a darkness

covered the deep. A piece of land emerged out of the water, that land is the rock, and that rock lies in the center of Jerusalem. Adam was buried here. Solomon built here. Jesus prayed here. Muhammad ascended here. And here on the side of that rock, before Jesus and Muhammad, before Solomon, before Moses, Abraham came to sacrifice his son.

The key that unites Christians, Muslims, and Jews is Abraham. Abraham and Isaac are a powerful story in the Jewish faith referred to as The Binding of Isaac. As Christians we believe that Jesus Christ is a descendant from the House of David who has descended from the faith tradition of Abraham. And it is true that Abraham had many children one of the names that we hear sometimes is Ishmael. Ishmael the descendant of Abraham and the slave woman is part of the lineage to which Muhammad lays claim. Muslims across the world see Abraham as a father of their faith as well.

The father of many nations. When Abraham looked to the stars on that silent night when God visited him in a dream, could he have imagined that he would actually have so many descendants thousands of years later?

I was always bothered when a parishioner in my previous church once said to me that it is okay for him to consider another Christian his brother or sister but he could not see a Jew or Muslim as such.

In the eyes of God all children are brothers and sisters. In the eyes of God all are worthy of a love beyond comprehension.

We demonize all Muslims because of the actions of a few that pervert their faith. We stereotype Jews because of decades of anti-Semitic sentiment across America.

This is not how we treat our neighbors, because make no mistake, these people are our neighbors. They are our brothers and sisters.

The invisible faith of Abraham in the word of God made visible by the stars in the sky has got to be the guiding light for the way in which we treat one another. This **MUST** be our guiding light in the way in which we see our brothers and sisters. We are just one of many nations that claim our heritage to Abraham.

Christ has not called us to condemn or demonize. What Christ has called us to do is to be instruments of love. Our invisible faith was made whole by the life and death of Jesus Christ and more importantly by the resurrection.

Look closer at the stars on our ceiling they make one more invisible thing almost a bit more visible. Look closely and you could almost see the image of the cross.

Almost made visible the sign of the cross, another way for us to visibly see our faith and to know that in the words of God, even in the midst of our world being turned upside down, even in the midst of things we may not understand, and even in the currents and chaos of this world, we should not be afraid.

Delivered to St. Stephen's Lutheran Church
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8/7/2016

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