

Part 1:

- A. Illus.: On the far northern shore of Lake Michigan, near Mackinaw City, there's a new park. It is called The **Headlands International Dark Sky Park**—one of six parks in the U.S. designated for looking at the stars. There are no lodges or lookout points. It's not a park for hiking or picnicking. People go there with their lawn chairs and blankets, wait for the darkness to banish the last vestige of the sun, and they look at the stars. There are no ground lights anywhere and the stars hold court. There are Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, there's Pegasus and Perseus, Cygnus and Cassiopeia, and a million more; so many that there are not names enough for them all. Each of those constellations carries ancient stories of adventures and heroes.

But those stories didn't actually happen, and those heroes never rescued anyone. **There is a story in the stars for us, a story that is perfect for Christmas.** Not the one you're thinking of, perhaps, but one that begins 2000 years before Jesus was born.

- B. Some sermons tell people what to do. Some teach us how to think. And some tell us to **remember. This sermon is to be sure we remember who we are and where we came from.**
- C. It was, I imagine, such a night when God led Abram out to look at the stars. Abram must've been about 80 years old. His name, which meant Exalted Father, mocked him because he and Sarai were childless. And they were way too old for that to change. It was the great heartbreak of their lives. Till God led Abraham out to look at the stars.

Part 2:

- A. When we meet Abram in Genesis he is 75 years old, living in what is today southern Iraq—Ur of the Chaldeans.

According to Gen 12:1, *“The Lord had said to Abram, ‘Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.’”* Then God made a history-shaping promise. We’re here this morning because of this promise made to Abram 4,000 years ago:

*“I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.”*

- B. V.4 says, *“So Abram went, as the LORD had told him.”* They all trekked hundreds of miles to Canaan and beyond to Egypt and back again. There were failures and victories and years that passed learning how to trust God. Then **Gen 15:1** says, *“After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: ‘Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.’”* Wow! What a wonderful promise.

But to Abram it was sort of an empty blessing because he and Sarai were old and they had no heir. What good is God’s great reward if you have no one to leave it to? That’s what Abram said in **v.2**, *“Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?”* [his servant].

Vv.4-5. *“Then the word of the Lord came to him: ‘This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.’ He took him outside and said, ‘Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’”* Abram stared at all those stars, spread across the dark and infinite heavens, stars upon stars, stars in formations and stars behind stars. Bright stars and tiny stars. The more he stared, the more stars he saw.

- C. And this is the thing: Abram *believed* what the Lord told him. He believed that even though his body was as good as dead when it came to fathering, God would somehow give him so many descendants they couldn't be counted. [cf Rom 4] **He trusted God's promise of life.**

What the Bible says next is astonishing: "**Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.**" God saw Abram trusted him with his entire life and future and so God gave him credit for being righteous. Abram *wasn't* righteous. He was a sinner just like us. But incredibly God *reckoned* him righteous because he trusted God to be his "very great reward." This is one of the most important statements in the Bible. It is repeated five more times in Bible, and it is the basis of our Christian assurance that if we *believe* on the Lord Jesus Christ, we will be saved. **Our faith secures his righteousness.**

- D. God added an additional promise to his covenant in v.7: "I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it." Then God goes through a mysterious ceremony of covenant making. **He makes his promise to Abram an inviolable covenant**—a contract witnessed and held in heaven. **God's covenant with Abraham guaranteed him innumerable descendants and an everlasting homeland.**

Part 3:

- A. That turned out well, didn't it! Except that nothing happened. No son. Months passed and years. Abraham didn't stop believing God but he did come to the very dangerous conclusion, *God helps them who help themselves.* Then came the whole sordid business with a sort of substitute Sarai, a servant named Hagar, and a wild child named Ishmael born to Abram at age 86. But, despite Abram's hopes, Ishmael wasn't the son whom God had promised. Thirteen more years pass and then, according to

Gen 17:1-8... Then God institutes circumcision for all the men as “a sign of the covenant... in your flesh.”

- B. Then, the birth announcement. God tells Abraham that within a year he and Sarah—God gave her a new name, too—will have the son they’ve waited a century to have. **V.17**, *“Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, ‘Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?’”* They were to call their son Isaac—*Laughter*—and while God would do great things through the other son, Ishmael, he was clear about this: *“But my covenant I will establish with Isaac.”* [v.21] And so it happened, one year later. Whew! That was a tight one! But all’s well that ends well!
- C. Not exactly. Some years pass and then this. **Gen 22:1-2...** In order to live in God’s blessing Abraham has to slay beloved blessing God gave them. **Can it possibly be true that the God-blessed life requires the death of God’s blessing bearer?** If Isaac dies, for all intents and purposes, Abraham dies. His future is over. There is no “*very great reward.*” Yet Abraham obeys. When Isaac asks his father where the lamb is for the burnt offering, Abraham tells him that God will provide the lamb. And when, just before the knife falls, God stays his hand, and provides a ram to take Isaac’s place, **v.14** says, *“So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, ‘On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided.’”*
- D. **Gen 22:15-18:** *The angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, “I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.”*

- E. Isaac passed the covenant promise on to his son, Jacob, and Jacob to his 12 sons—the twelve tribes of Israel. Decades pass and centuries. Four hundred years after Jacob, the descendants of Abraham numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Unfortunately, all of them were slaves. In Egypt. Till God said, “Let my people go!” And that’s a story for another day.

Part 4:

- A. So God’s covenant with Abraham wends its way through the stories and families of the Old Testament. The starry night when Israel passed through the parted waters of the Red Sea while Pharaoh waited restlessly to pursue. The 40 years of wilderness nights with no home in sight. I imagine that their first night in the Promised Land the Israelites showed their children the stars and told them the story.
- B. Other nights came. The great King David looked at the stars from the parapets of his palace in Jerusalem. And the broken-hearted Jeremiah saw those stars from the depths of the well where the Israel had thrown him to keep him quiet. And when the Jews were exiled back to the lands where Abraham started they must have looked at the stars and wondered if they had forfeited their future. But in his great love God brought a remnant—a fraction—of Israel back to the burned and broken walls of Jerusalem. And there, with nothing to their name but the LORD, they looked up at the stars. **There were so many stars, and so few left in Israel.**
- C. At the very end of the Old Testament the last prophet, Malachi, warns Israel of God’s fiery judgment. Then he says, in **Mal 4:2**, *“But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays.”* **Then for 400 years—400 more years!—God was as silent as the stars.**

Part 5:

- A. The same stars that Abraham counted populated the night sky when shepherds were keeping watch over their flocks. Then, out from among all those stars burst the blinding glory of the Lord and an angel from the bright courts of heaven announced, *“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”*
- B. Hundreds of miles away, near the place in Ur where Abram’s journey had begun, men who read in the heavens the courses of mankind—magi—saw a bright star in the east, a star which told them that the king of the Jews had been born. And so they came, following the same roads Abraham had walked, to worship the child and present him with their gold, frankincense and myrrh.
- C. When Mary was told by the angel that she would bear the Messiah she said, *“My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”* And she said,
*“He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors.”*
- D. When Jesus was born God’s covenant with Abraham had a new lease on life. A new Son, the true Israel, had been born. And, as at creation, I think, *“the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy.”* [Job 38:7]

Part 6:

- A. Some three decades later, the hopes of Israel ran high. *“Hosanna!”* they shouted in the streets of Jerusalem. *“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”* and *“Peace in heaven and glory in the highest.”* God’s ancient covenant with Abraham seemed revitalized.

- B. Then, as he had with Isaac, God called for the death of the Son of Promise. *“The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,”* John the Baptist had called him. *“The Son of Man who gives his life as a ransom for many,”* Jesus had described himself. But the Son had no children of his own. If he died—this Son of Promise, this Anointed One of God—there would be no descendants. **The stars might as well stop shining.**
- C. Jesus was crucified on the very same mountain where Abraham had taken Isaac—the very place Abraham named *The LORD Will Provide*. But this time, of course, God did not stay the hand of death. This time the Son died, and the sky grew black as death, and the earth shook with the shock.

Part 7:

- A. On the third day, Jesus the Messiah rose from the dead. He rose as the pioneer and progenitor of a new race of humanity, a second Adam from whom would come a people who cannot die, a holy people with an everlasting homeland, too many to count.
- B. First, he had been called Abram—Exalted Father. And so he was, for all Israel came through him. But God changed his name to Abraham—Father of Many Nations. The Jews haven’t birthed any other nations. The sons of Ishmael aren’t part of that promise. So how is it that Abraham is the Father of Many Nations? Illus.: Can you picture the fireworks of last summer? A faraway concussion--*thhue*. A thin, arching trail of light climbing high into the night. Then—*boom!*—and stars burst out in every direction, and they birth more clusters of stars, and more from them. A kind of starry family tree that starts from the top, not the bottom, till it fills the sky with its bright offspring. So it is with us who have been born from above. **We are the descendants of Abraham, not because we have his DNA,**

but because we share his faith in the God who promised to be our shield and our very great reward.

- C. At the very beginning God promised Abraham, *“all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”*

And in the last book of the Bible, **Revelation**, John seeing our future, said, *“there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice:*

*“Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb.”* [Rev. 7:9-10]

Conclusion

So when you look into the night sky in some dark and bright night, when all the stars come out as if it were a vast family reunion, don't look for Orion or Pegasus. Look for your own story written in the covenant God made with Abraham and fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

He took him outside and said, ‘Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’

And there you are!