

Leaning Forward
Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18
March 29, 2020—Shawnee
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Astronomers estimate that there are about 100 billion stars just in our galaxy, the Milky Way. And there are about 100 billion galaxies. So altogether, in the visible universe, there are approximately ten thousand billion billion stars!

Also, according to astronomers, when we see stars in the night sky we are essentially looking backwards into time, back into light that actually left the star hundreds of thousands or even millions of years ago. In fact, because the stars are so far away, some of them may have already burned out and we just don't know it yet. So, even if the stars we're looking at stopped shining today, it would be 10,000-10 billion years before we would stop seeing them. It's sort of a paradox that while we're really looking back, we're also looking forward toward the light of the future.

When God pulls Abram outside to show him how many descendants he was promised, the bright night sky is full of stars, representing a promise of things to come—a promise from God. Abram at 90 and his elderly wife, Sarai, are childless, and 4,000 or so years ago children represented much more than someone to love and care for, or someone to be proud of. Having children and land meant that you had a future. And here in the fifteenth chapter of Genesis, God is telling Abram that he and Sarai will have as many descendants as there are stars and that the land he sees before him will be theirs. In other words, God is promising Abram that he will have a future. "Don't be afraid," God tells him, "I've got a plan, and you're in it. You can't begin to count these stars, can you? Likewise, you can't begin to count the blessings 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 tells us that Abram "believed" God, and that Abram's statement of belief elicits a promise, a covenant from God. And here's where it gets interesting, because embedded within this covenant is the claim that Abram's offspring will indeed be numerous, BUT they will also become aliens in a foreign land and further, they will be oppressed for four hundred years. And then as if that's not bleak enough, there's the promise to Abram that "you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age" and "they (your descendants) shall come back here in the fourth generation."

Suddenly, as the conditions of the covenant become clear, the promise of land made to Abram and his descendants loses its sense of immediacy. Suddenly the horizon has shifted forward—four hundred years forward—to a time when Abram is no longer alive. So, while at first glance, this story might appear to say Abram will be immediately rewarded for his faithfulness, a more careful reading shows the four-hundred year hiatus and, more significantly, the fact that Abram will not be around to enjoy the benefits of God's covenant.

So, the lesson for us in this episode of Abram's story is not just about faithfulness when there is no evidence. And it's not about delayed gratification. Rather, it's about faithfully leaning forward into the future for generations to come. To do that successfully, though, we have to adjust our attitude about time.

I read somewhere that a few years back researchers developed a clock that loses less than one second of time every 200 million years. Yet, for humans, in addition to the science of time, which can be extremely precise, there is also the perception of time, which is completely relative. Time is experienced differently by different people. For those of us at home in COVID lockdown, time seems to be moving incredibly slowly, yet for those who are sick with COVID or another deadly disease, time is of the essence and time seems to fly by.

The point is that even when God explains to Abram that he will be long gone before his descendants enjoy the benefits of God's covenant, Abram remains faithful, somehow understanding time as relative—that he is part of an on-going story into the future that humans cannot even begin to imagine, and that even if there will be no immediate benefit for him, he is blessed to be part of God's story. Maybe that's why the stars are such an effective and meaningful example for him—they've been in the sky for billions of years and they'll be there for billions of years to come—timeless from a human perspective, just like God.

God's timelessness is what is underneath those words, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield." In other words, we need not be anxious, because God is in charge, and, 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.

When I accepted the invitation to preach at Shawnee Church back in February, I had no idea we would be meeting virtually through the technology of Facebook Live. None of us could have imagined that today we would all be locked down in our homes to protect ourselves and others from the novel coronavirus. None of us could have imagined how quickly and dramatically everything in our lives would change. Suddenly we're not sure what the future will look like. Suddenly, we are faced with no real evidence that this pandemic will end anytime soon or that we will ever go back to the way things were just a month ago. Like Abram, we are called to trust in God's promises.

And like Abram, the church finds itself in uncharted territory, in the middle of an unexpected journey through a world suddenly changed. The good news is that we're learning a lot. We're learning to let go of what's not essential; that community can be developed in ways other than face to face; that digital and social media can connect people inside and outside the church; and that Easter may be about more than a sanctuary full of lilies and trumpets and people in their finery.

We've heard many times that "we can't go back to the glory days of the church." Suddenly, some of us are looking back to February fondly as the "good old days!!" And while we don't know where this pandemic will take the church,

we do know we will all be different on the other side. We also know that following God means giving up the expectation of knowing where you're going and when you'll arrive.

A New Yorker column last week suggested that "over time, the impact of the novel coronavirus may be so sweeping that it alters human rituals and behaviors that have evolved over millennia."

The novel coronavirus may change the church forever. But you know, that may not be such a bad thing!

I've heard from many church leaders that they had been **considering** live-streaming worship for a while. They'd been **thinking** about developing an on-line option to receive gifts and offerings. They **intended** to look into getting a Zoom account. And now they're doing all of those things—and more, letting go of some 20th century ways of doing church (that weren't working so well anyway), and replacing them with 21st century ways, and admitting, "Hey, this is way better!"

Friends, we can't look at this pandemic as just something to "get through" for a few weeks or months, until things "get back to normal." We can't go back! We must put aside our old playbook and write a new one for a new way of being the church in a new world. We have to look for clues of what God wants us to do differently now: new ministries, new partnerships, new ways of gathering for worship and governance of the church. Trust that God has a plan, and you're in it. "You can't begin to count the blessings that the future will bring," God said to Abram. "But there will be a future for you, and I will be with you every step of the way."

So, let us move forward together in this time of uncertainty, with a prayerful hope that God, in God's gracious providence, will use our faith and our human ingenuity to help the church lean into the future, in this season and beyond, with as many blessings as there are stars in the sky.

Amen.