

“Patience & Persistence: A Promising Pair”

Genesis 15:1-6

New Revised Standard Version



This NASA Hubble image from December 2012 is called “Young Stars at Home in Ancient Cluster.” It’s a globular cluster, and at over 10 billion years old, it’s one of the most ancient collections of stars that we know of. It’s been blazing for over twice as long as our solar system has existed.¹

This ancient star cluster contains a high number of “blue straggler” stars, some of which you can see in this image. These stars display characteristics of stars younger than the others around them, despite models suggesting that most of the stars within

globular clusters should have formed at approximately the same time. So their origin is something of a mystery, however they’ve figured out that almost 40 percent of the stars within this cluster’s core region are binary systems. Meaning, collisions between stars in this turbulent area could be producing the growing number of young blue straggler stars. NASA captions this image with this statement: “Lying 13,000 light-years away, this ancient cluster of stars is far beyond our reach, yet the clarity of Hubble’s images brings it tantalizingly close.”²

Do you ever feel like the promises of God are 13,000 light-years away, far beyond your reach or your ability to believe, yet the verses of scripture or religious platitudes that you’ve been taught bring them tantalizingly close, making it seem like you should

¹ NASA Goddard, “Young Stars at Home in Ancient Cluster: NASA ID: GSFC_20171208_Archive_e001789,” (Dec. 8, 2012), image accessed on Sept. 18, 2020 at

https://images.nasa.gov/details-GSFC_20171208_Archive_e001789.

² NASA, *ibid.*

be able to reach them or attain them if you just worked a little harder or reached a little farther?

Has it ever felt like the stars are aligning for everyone else but YOU, and you just can't seem to catch a break?

Have you ever waited for something so long that you stopped praying for it, stopped wishing for it, because you knew it would never happen and you just wanted to move on?

Have you ever given up on God?

You are not alone. If you answered "yes" to one or all of these questions then congratulations, you are human. You're a human being with hopes, desires, wishes, and longings – some of which will be fulfilled in your lifetime and many of which will not. Abram understands you. He gets it. And while Sarai is not mentioned in today's text, she gets it too. Almost all of us have times when we feel like the promises of God are 13,000 lightyears away, forever out of our reach.

You see, as we meet Abram today he is at a crossroads on a road he never asked to be on in the first place. Abram and Sarai, who will later become Abraham and Sarah, have been through a lot. In Genesis 12, Abram receives a call from God: *"Go from your country and from your family and journey to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing,"* (Gen. 12:1-2).

Abram's call is a three-fold promise: the promise of land (v7), the promise of blessing or a 'great name' or perhaps what we would call fame (v2-3), and the promise of descendants (v2), a family. Now that would be quite a promise if it weren't for the fact that Abram had to pick up and leave his life as he knew it to go to a place where he had NEVER been before to begin a calling of which he knew nothing about. Now this may sound super appealing to a wanderlust twenty-something, but Abram was no spring chicken at age 75, and neither was Sarai. Some of you are around age 75. How would like

to pack up life as you know it right now and move to a completely new country and start all over again? And if you're thinking, "*Well, if it means that I could be closer to my kids and grandkids then maybe,*" remember Abram and Sarai have no kids, and so of course, no grandkids either. So they're not headed to a place where someone will take care of them, nor are they headed to a nice retirement villa with a golf course and a patio deck that faces a lake.

Honestly, I'm not sure how much of this threefold promise Abram and Sarai saw as a blessing. Because between that initial moment of call and THIS moment in today's text, the journey was NOT easy. As if packing up and leaving with only his wife and nephew in tow wasn't hard enough, when he got to the land of Canaan Abram let fear get the best of his faith. Out of fear for his life because he just knew that Pharaoh would be jealous of his beautiful bride and try to kill him for her, Abram lies and says Sarai is his sister and he hands her over to Pharaoh to have his way with her,

completely disregarding her body, life, and personhood.

That's a sermon for another day, but thanks be to God plagues descend on Pharaoh's house and Sarai and Abram get out of there, along with nephew Lot, and then Lot and Abram split up taking two different parts of land, which causes conflict. Lot and his land are attacked, Abram helps rescue them, and that brings us to the crossroads where Abram finds himself today. Weary and wondering, "why did I come here again?" These might have even been the very words he prayed as he lay down to sleep that night when the Lord comes to him in a vision.

We all know from Angel Greetings 101, that when the first words out of someone's mouth are, "*Fear not. Do not be afraid,*" (v1) that somehow God's presence is involved. God shows up to reassure Abram and to reiterate God's promises. God speaks first of protection – "*I am your shield*" (v1), which is fitting right after the battle Abram's been in, but then God says, "*your reward shall be very great,*" (v1). And THIS is where I think Abram's

like, “*Okay. Full stop. You keep talking about this reward. But we don’t have any kids. We are aging every day; time is slipping away. In fact, I’m making my will, and I have no heir, so you know what? I’m naming a slave in my household, Eliezer of Damascus, as my heir.*”

Horrifically, slavery was the norm in this day and it’s just one more sign of how people were viewed as property – the stories of both Sarai and Eliezer bear this tragic truth. And it underscores just how radical Abram’s move is to name Eliezer as his heir, because that would NOT be his first choice, but he feels forced into a corner. Abram gets practical and pragmatic because he is done with God’s promises.

What God keeps telling him about how he’s going to have a great family and nation is SO far out of the realm of possibility and believability for Abram that he’s just like, “I’m taking matters into my own hands. Don’t talk to me about this promise, God. Don’t talk to

me about the ‘reward’ you’ll give me. I’ll believe it when I see it.”

And of course, he CAN’T see it because everything about his lived experience – his age, he and Sarai’s inability to have children, his waiting for God to make good on these promises even after doing everything God asked - everything about Abram’s lived experience is telling him this “so-called” promise from God is going to end up being just one more disappointment.

Abram is impatient, hurt, and “done” with God, or at least done with the God that keeps making and breaking promises.

When’s the last time a promise to you was broken? When’s the last time something that you were banking on didn’t happen? When’s the last time your expectations were not met? What did it feel like? What are the places of brokenness and disappointment in your life right now?³

³ Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, “Commentary on Genesis 15:1-6,” *Working Preacher* (20 Sept. 2020), accessed on Sept. 18, 2020 at

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4580.

With all that 2020 is throwing at us, you may feel like the future is bleak, empty. Those are natural and normal feelings to have. I'll say it again: you are not alone. Abram is at a very low point when we meet him today. And it's at this point that God shows up, unannounced, to meet Abram. But even though he is literally in the very presence of God – something we today might give anything to experience – Abram is not in a place to hear a reminder about any promise of God's. He only sees his pain. Present reality has a way of overwhelming future hope, doesn't it?

Having offspring means everything to Abram and Sarai, especially in the ancient world where children signified so much about one's faith and social standing (or lack of it) and also provided a security network of care in old age. Those stigmas and realities are still around today, but in the ancient world, to not have a child was to have nothing.

What is remarkable about Abram is that in his painful impatience, Abram is persistent in reminding God of God's

promise to him, even as he dismisses his belief in that promise. Abram shifts from promise to pragmatism, shielding himself from more disappointment, by taking things into his own hands and picking an heir that he can control himself and that is not dependent upon God's promises or God's timing, all the while not letting God off the hook by reminding God that there is yet a promise unfulfilled. In fact, Abram's so persistent that he doesn't even let God answer his question in verse two, "*What will you give me, God, for I continue childless?*" before launching into an accusation in verse 3, "*YOU, O God, have given me no offspring.*"

The impatience and persistence we see in Abram here are akin to the laments that we read in Psalms. They are words that hold God accountable. They are words that say, "*things are not how they should be.*" And it's often out of these places of deep grief and anger for how we are experiencing life that our own call to action comes or that we are able to wake up to a new perspective. We know something is not right. We

demand change. And in demanding change and naming what is not right with the world out loud – and maybe even in our prayers to God – we can hear our own voice and emotion in such a way that we realize that WE are a key part of the promises of God coming true. We are not separate from God's promises. We have agency and responsibility as well. And part of that agency and responsibility is trust and faith, as well as some healthy impatience and persistence.

Because here's the thing, while Abram is feeling hopeless, this place of hopelessness is not where the story ends. God speaks God's promise again, and then he illustrates that promise by bringing Abram out of the dark shadows of his tent into the brightness of the night sky saying, "*Look up; count the stars; keep counting; that's how big your family will be,*" (v5). We're not sure how long this moment lasted, but I like to think Abram lingered here a bit in awe before breaking the silence, "*Okay. I believe. I don't understand. I don't get it. But I'll trust.*"

Outside, under the vast, unending stars dotting the night sky, Abram is able to believe what seemed impossible in the close confines of the familiar. The God who created the heavens and scattered the stars in radiance across the sky is the SAME God who promises him that he will have a son and, indeed, enough descendants to rival the number of the stars.⁴

In that moment of perspective shifting, something clicked. Abram realized that God is God and he is not. He realized that this same God that is promising him things is the very God who gave him life to begin with. He would not be here without God. Everything he has is because of God. Everything he will ever have is because of God. Looking at the vastness of the stars and sky, perhaps even a sky like this one behind me, Abram has an "aha" moment. Faith returns. Or crystallizes in some new way. Of course, we know that it will be years before the promise of a son still yet comes true, and we know that Abram and Sarai will doubt this promise and try to

⁴ Schifferdecker, *ibid.*

take things into their own hands again – remember the story of Hagar and Ishmael? But nonetheless, in THIS moment, Abram believes. Abram trusts. Abram has the kind of faith of which Hebrews 11 speaks, “Now faith is the assurance of things HOPED for, the conviction of things NOT seen,” (Hebrews 11:1).⁵

In seeing the stars, Abram could finally see how the faraway-ness of promises does not negate their existence nor does it hinder their potential of coming true.

Living “by faith” can really get old; we would probably all prefer to live “by proof.” But sometimes, MOST times, we don’t have proof. But when it comes to faith, proof is not the doorway to possibility, promise is, hope is.

You see, God pulled Abram out of his own fears and worries so that he could see something bigger, something beyond what he could even comprehend or

imagine on his own. This is what dreams and visions are for, right? And this is what hope is all about. To imagine and believe in something that is beyond our own personal experience and even perhaps beyond even our realm of what we believe is possible. Because faith is not about what WE think is possible but about that which GOD can make possible. But God can’t do it without us.

Faith lives in this continuum between pragmatic realism (which is where we, like Abram, live most of the time) and the magnitude of God’s promise (which is what God illuminates for us in visions and moments of grounding and grace).⁶ Sometimes we’re at one end or the other or somewhere in the middle, but faith is what holds us here, and it’s what holds us together. Under the vastness of that starry sky, Abram moves a bit on the continuum and is able to hold onto the promise despite

⁵ Rolf Jacobson, Craig Koester, and Kathryn Schifferdecker, “Podcast #417 - God’s Promise to Abraham,” *I Love to Tell the Story* (12 Sept. 2020), accessed on Sept. 18, 2020 at https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=1295.

⁶ Rolf Jacobson, Craig R. Koester, and Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, “Podcast #232 - Abraham’s Descendants,” *I Love to Tell the Story* (10 Sept. 2016), accessed on Sept. 18, 2020 at https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=791.

all the evidence to the contrary.⁷

Author, spoken word artist, and social justice activist, Sonya Renee Taylor, shared a story and an invitation this week on in an Instagram Live video she titled “The Attic of Impossibility.”⁸ These are her words:

My friend Airial was talking about the possibility of moving to a new place. And as she’s in this conversation about buying a home, she’s thinking about her student loans and other bills, and you know, she’s not felt as if she’s been in the economic position to even entertain this idea of home ownership. There are just aspects of buying a house she never explored because she just assumed it wasn’t possible for her.

And it made me think today about how much slower the universe moves when it is trying to plow through our impossibilities... Because you see my friend Airial is friends with a bunch of homeowners –

people who make less money than her or who have similar potential dynamics economically, and yet it never occurred to her to ask her friends how they bought a home because again, she just assumed it wasn’t possible for her and never would be.

What I want to invite my friend Airial, and ALL of us, to do today, is to unlock the attic of impossibility. Because there is some stuff you have shoved up and shelved away in that attic as impossible, and who knows, there could be opportunities that unveil themselves to you that you will miss because the very thought or willingness that would allow you to take ahold of that opportunity is locked up in your attic of impossibility collecting dust.

I want to give us permission today to go into the attic of impossibility and sort through what you’ve put there. Rummage around through all the things you’ve told yourself are impossible and through all the things that other people have told you are impossible

⁷ Jacobson, Koester, and Schifferdecker, “Podcast #232,” *ibid.*

⁸ Sonya Renee Taylor, “What’s Up Y’all: The Attic of Impossibility” *Instagram Live Video* @sonyareneetaylor, Sept. 16, 2020.

*for you. See what you find. Because in 2020 we are being given the opportunity to reconfigure everything. And often reconfiguration comes through hardship, and we're experiencing hardship right now, but inside of that hardship could be the opportunity to seize what we most desire. So go up in that attic of the impossible and start pulling down impossible things.*⁹

And to carry Sonya Renee Taylor's metaphor a little further, I, Anne, would add the invitation to pull those dusty thoughts and beliefs out of the attic of impossibility and just let them sit around in the living room so that you have to look at them every day. Who knows, maybe just by looking at them, they'll begin to look more like a part of your life, more like that something that COULD be possible.

Maybe they'll start to look like the stars in the night sky that are outside our window every single night, but which we so often cannot see because of how densely we have crowded our cities and our lives. Light

pollution is a real thing. Just because we cannot see the stars does not mean that they are not there.

The stars are there. Waiting for us. Who knows, some of them may have even been there for billions of years. And some of them are colliding with other stars creating new stars – every single day – new dreams – in Abram and Sarai's case – a child – but in your case – who knows what that dream, that desire may be?

We will not see these stars, we will not know these promises, these dreams, if we don't allow ourselves to name our desires, to name our impatience with those desires not yet coming true, and to take those feelings to God persistently. And when we do so...when we name it before God, God might just show up and show us a promise, a blessing, that is still yet ours to experience. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but someday, somehow.

Remember, the promise that God shows Abram calls him to

⁹ Taylor, *ibid.* Everything from the previous footnote to this one is Sonya Renee Taylor.

a sense of faith in a future that goes beyond his current experience, and that, will never be FULLY realized in his own experience or lifetime.¹⁰

Have you ever considered the fact that maybe not all of the promises of God are ours to experience personally? Our faith has never been just about us. It's about all of us. It's about the on-going story of God of which we are a part, but not the whole. We don't have to see something come to fruition in order or it to be a promise that God fulfills. In fact, our lives, our actions might be part of someone ELSE's promise coming true. Isn't that inspiring? What a gift, right? To know that the legacy you leave is not just through your DNA and offspring, but through you usng your unique gifts, thoughts, skills, and ideas to build the kin-dom of God here on earth, as it is in heaven.

You know what they say, "*It's in the stars.*" It was true for Abram. Maybe it's true for you too.

Amen.

¹⁰ Jacobson, Koester, and Schifferdecker, "Podcast #417," *ibid.*