The Second Sunday in Lent
February 24, 2013
Genesis 15:1-12,17-18
St. John’s Episcopal Church
The Rev. Kara Wagner Sherer

“Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.”

I remember in my first year in college in my Western Civilization Course called The Great Conversation when my friend Troy, a good Presbyterian boy from Texas heard that Moses did not write the first five books of the Bible. Troy had a crisis of faith. He denied, it argued about it until we were all sick of talking with him. In the last issue of my alumni magazine I learned that Troy is now an ordained minister in a liberal Protestant denomination serving a congregation in Scotland. Who’d a thunk?

I can’t tell you why the same information didn’t cause a crisis in my faith. I too had been taught that the Bible was literally true, that the earth was created in six days. Somehow this new information did not contradict my understanding of God, or shake my faith. Somehow I knew God was larger than my own understanding.

The story from Genesis is the story of a crisis of faith. Abram is the name of the man who came to be called Abraham, but that was after he decided to follow the Lord. This story explains how that came to be.

In many ways Abram is the archetypal human being with a story that has been repeated and repeated throughout human history. His life is in crisis, without meaning, and so he turns to something outside himself. When Abram complains that his memory and all his worth will end because he has no direct descendant he receives a promise from the Lord, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. Your descendants will be more numerous then them.”

Now some human beings have counted the stars, and every year we discover new stars to add to that count. Other human beings have discovered that we are made of the same elements that make up stars, just arranged differently; we are made of star dust; literally.

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In response to the Lord’s promise Abram offers a sacrifice. This is religion, a ritualized response to an unknowable being, a response that makes no provable difference. Humans have made sacrifices to gods for thousands of years – giving up children, animals, money, time in an effort to appease, bargain with, or thank a divine being.

And then Abram sinks into deep darkness – horrifying, endless, hopeless darkness. Now we call it clinical depression, but changing the name doesn’t make it better. Nothing does.

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Kenneth Miller, in his book “Finding Darwin’s God” argues that creationism or intelligent design is not only *not* science, but is a dangerous attack on faith and religion. For years religious people have clung to the idea that God explains the things we can’t explain. This God of the Gaps splits the world into two parts: the part explained by science and the part we can’t explain, that God controls. The problem for religion is that the part we don’t know is becoming smaller and smaller. Soon, the God of the Gaps will be so tiny we will hardly see or notice him.

Miller says “the creationists have sought God in darkness” this “suggests that God dwells only in the shadows of our understanding. I suggest that, if God is real, we should be able to find him somewhere else-in the bright light of human knowledge, spiritual and scientific.”

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In the middle of the night, fire and smoke pass over Abram’s sacrifice and the Lord makes a covenant, a promise to Abram, giving to his descendants the land we call the Holy Land, a land still soaked with blood and conflict. Religious belief is powerful and dangerous. It is not unfair to criticize religion for bringing more evil than good into the world.

Perhaps that is why I have found so much joy and comfort in this exercise called “Lent Madness,” an online NCAA style bracket competition in which we are encouraged to vote for the saints we think deserve to win the “Golden Halo.” This is of course completely unscientific. Just because all the Episcopalians in Hawaii voted for Queen Emma of Hawaii does mean she really is holier than Saint Paul! But there is something about this tangible, measurable way to get to know how faith has changed the lives of real people, that feeds my faith.

This week we learned about Janani Luwuum, and Anglican priest in Uganda under the Dictator Idi Amin, who was accused of being an enemy of the state, and was personal shot by Amin because he refused to back down. It was not science that gave Janani a reason to speak out, it wasn’t even religion that inspired him. It was his faith that gave Janani the courage to stand against evil.

What my faith has brought to me *is* more good than evil. Faith has been a gift to me. Faith has given me courage in hard times. Faith has given me strange dreams, the desire to be generous in response to the abundance of gifts I have been given. Faith saved me from the terror of depression and helped me to hope for light. Faith has given me a way out of conflict, the ability to take risks and do new things. My faith has given me the gift and challenge of looking toward heaven and counting the stars, of wondering if I can count them.

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