

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

21 February



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Genesis 15: 1-18

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.' But Abram said, 'O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?' And Abram said, 'You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.' But the word of the Lord came to him, 'This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.' He brought him outside and said, 'Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Then he said to him, 'I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.' But he said, 'O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?' He said to him, 'Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtle-dove, and a young pigeon.' He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. Then the Lord said to Abram, 'Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and

shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years; but I will bring judgement on the nation that they serve, and afterwards they shall come out with great possessions. As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.'

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire-pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates...

REFLECT

This is a strange story.

Abraham is given a look at the stars and the improbable promise of God.

When, like Abraham, we ask for help to trust God's promises we are expecting some sort of mundane but binding guarantee.

Like a contract.

Which ensures God will cough up because we are, well, equals and both bound by human law.

Abraham ends up sitting on the ground between bisected corpses slowly going off in the sun, shooing away vultures and waiting.

This may or may not have been an ancient way of sealing an understanding but it makes it no less bloody, smelly or susceptible to our control.

And then God comes as deep and terrifying darkness and then fire and light. And a promise of both suffering and joy.

The images seem foreign to us.

And yet strangely familiar.

This is not the first nor the last time God speaks fire and light in the midst of deep darkness.

The Torah is full of stories of God appearing in dramatic and unexpected ways to people where they are and in the image of the concrete things of their place.

It is possible that God now appears only as urgent memos and traffic jams, committee meetings, government questionnaires and internet click-bait.

If we leave aside the bureaucratic busyness of our lives to search for God perhaps there is still the chance of the look at the stars, the deep and terrifying darkness, the promise of suffering and joy, the light and the fire.

SAYINGS

On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.

Annie Dillard
Teaching a Stone to Talk

My God my bright abyss
into which all my longing will not go
once more I come to the edge of all I know
and believing nothing believe in this:

Christian Wiman
My Bright Abyss

On that happy night – in
secret; no one saw me through the dark –
and I saw nothing then,
no other light to mark
the way but fire pounding my heart.

That flaming guided me
more firmly than the noonday sun
and waiting there was he
I know so well- who shone
when nobody appeared to come.

St John of the Cross
Dark Night

PRAY

You do not have to sit outside in the dark. If, however, you want to look at the stars, you will find that darkness is necessary. But the stars neither require nor demand it.

Annie Dillard
Teaching a Stone to Talk

Pray today in the darkness, under the stars if you can.

FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Does any part of this ring particularly true?

Does any part of this seem just plain wrong?

Is God as present now as he was to Abraham? Why or why not?