

Faith in the Dark

Genesis 15:1-12,17-18

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Luke 13:31-35

Psalms 27

Have you ever experienced complete darkness? When I was living in the middle of nowhere Colorado, my office was less than a half mile from my house, and I walked that dirt road back and forth multiple times a day. It wasn't uncommon for me to make that walk in the dark. The stars were so bright, that even when there was no moon, the sky looked almost white from the light they gave off in those clear skies. But occasionally it would be overcast. This was not a suburban location. There was no neighborhood. There were no yard lights. And on one occasion, before the days of cell phones, I found myself walking home on a night that set the definition for pitch black. It was like ink. I could not see my hand in front of my face. Typically, your eyes adjust to the darkness, to a certain degree. But on this one night, there was zero light to adjust my eyes to. That was the longest, short walk of my life. I'd walked it hundreds of times, but without the guidance of any light, I found myself unable to stay on the path. I kept taking shorter and shorter steps, lifting my legs higher trying to avoid stumbling or landing in the ditch along the roadside. I am not a person who is afraid of the dark, but that degree of disorientation created a type of dread that is difficult to articulate. There are no words to describe the relief I felt when, from a distance, I saw the lights on inside my house.

Sometimes that is how it feels to be human. We are stuck inside of time, without the ability to see the future, and not always sure how to understand the moment we are in. We make choices and navigate through life based on what we know, what we have experienced in the past and where we desire to be in the future. But there are times when the experiences of life leave us feeling like we are navigating in the dark and it is unsettling. Every generation of humans have lived in unprecedented times. We've never been here before, the world has never functioned like this, we don't know what to expect or what we

can count on and it's unsettling. We Christians understand that we are to live based on our faith, but let's be honest, that is often much easier said than done. And what does that even mean when we are supposed to be making wise choices based on what we know, what life has taught us, what we've learned from our past experiences?

Abraham is lauded as a man of great faith, a man who believed God and had that belief regarded as righteousness. But let us all take just a moment to first acknowledge the fact that Abram's faith was not without resistance or questions. In today's account of the Abrahamic covenant, God comes to him heralding God's self as Abram's shield, promising him a great reward. And immediately Abram resists. How can God claim to be trustworthy when ten years had passed without any proof that God would fulfill the promise of a child? Abram felt like he had no reason to trust God, and yet he had followed God this far. He started making his own plans to uphold the story God had started... if he had no children of his own then culturally, he assumed he would pass his possessions and his lineage on to his servant Eliezer. But Abram and God both knew that was not the original plan, even if childless Abram had been 75 years old when God first made that promise and he was certainly not getting any younger. And so this great man of faith, brings his honest heartache, confusion, and frustration straight before the face of God. And he did it immediately after God reaffirmed the promise. If we're honest, we would probably have done the same thing in that position. Perhaps with a bit more foot stomping, tears, or even expletives. Abram had left his whole world to follow God, trusting God, and now he felt abandoned because he couldn't see any way for that promise, the thing he had left everything for, to be fulfilled.

God didn't get mad. Abram wasn't rebuked for his honest outburst. God loved him. God knew the problem was that Abram couldn't see into the future. Abram only had his own experience from which to plan, prepare, and order his life. In the absence of anything tangible to hold onto from an intangible God and an intangible promise, Abram was left looking inside himself to do something only God could do. Rather than yell at him for

making his own calculations, God took him outside and asked him to look outward. To look up. It was that encounter with God, that tenderness from God, that experience that proved to Abram's heart that God hadn't abandoned him, that led Abram into belief.

Even so, God chose to solidify the agreement in a way Abram would understand and feel. This account might feel creepy to us, cutting animals in half and walking between the carcasses. But at that time in history, this was a common treaty-making ceremony. It was a way of illustrating that anyone who broke the contract would end up like one of the slain creatures. Abram prepared the ceremony, but God didn't show up. It wasn't until the sun had gone down, after Abram had fallen asleep that God appeared.

This feels very relatable. Maybe not the animal carcasses, but the waiting for God, the feeling like we've done what we were supposed to do, and we need God to do the rest, but God is not showing up in a way we can see. And then the deep darkness comes. The terror and disorientation of being unable to see or make sense of what is happening, to feel powerless to effect it, waiting in dread.

In this account, God appears after Abram is feeling the oppressiveness of an inability to see. God appears as smoke and flame. This is the same imagery of the shekinah glory cloud that leads Moses and the Israelites out of Egypt. In fact, it appears repeatedly throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. Christians understand this imagery to represent Jehovah, our savior, the presence of Christ. Abram wasn't rescued from the feelings that stalk in the darkness of unknowing. Abram was met in that darkness by the light of Christ, the one who upholds the purposes of God against every threat. Abram couldn't see it, he didn't know how to calculate a plan without more information, so God let him feel a reality that exists beyond human calculation.

Abram's story is a familiar one to us, so familiar we might dismiss the wildness of it as something of Biblical proportions and entirely distant from our own experience. But many of us have had some kind of experience with God, of knowing something in a way that is difficult to explain or describe. God leads God's people. God is present with us, even

today, all these years later. We feel the darkness in similar ways to our ancient ancestors, lying on our beds, our minds spinning and our bellies filling with dread as we try to plan and make sense of our circumstances.

According to the psalmist, our problem is that we lack patience. We must dwell with God, spend time listening for God's voice, and seeking God's face if we want to experience God's presence. Paul agrees, saying that in our failure to wait on God in expectation of the fulfilment of the promises, we end up trying to satisfy ourselves apart from God. We do what Abram did, calculating based on what we can see. Ultimately, our lack of patience risks causing us to calculate as if what we can see is all that exists and then we make gods of our appetites, losing our participation in God's purposes with us.

Jesus words are equal parts hope and warning for us. When he says God desires to gather and protect as a mother hen her chicks, we know God stands ready to comfort and protect us when we walk through dark times. When Jesus says, "but you were not willing", we are warned that our own determination to protect and plan according to our limited calculations will leave us in the darkness without the hope of participation and the help we have available to us in God. David tells us to be strong. Paul says to stand firm. Faith is not easy. It is a choice we make to keep our eyes on God when we find ourselves in dark times. Faith isn't necessary when we can see.

May we be a people of faith, willing to keep looking to God when we find ourselves shrouded in darkness, honest about our experiences, yet waiting in expectation for God to strengthen our faith when we lack sight.