

LOOK AT THE STARS ABRAHAM

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

August 10, 2025

God said to Abram: Look up at the stars. If you were to look up at the sky in your neighborhood on a cloudless night, you might see a few planets in our solar system and some stars. Since I haven't yet had cataract surgery, those of you who have, may be able to see even a few more than I can! But unfortunately for us, light pollution will obscure most of what can be visible to the naked eye. Have you ever been somewhere where there was no light pollution; where you were able to see a multitude of stars, and even our Milky Way Galaxy gloriously displayed across the heavens. Our universe is truly glorious, and incredibly vast.

The European Space Agency website answers this question: "Have you ever looked up into the night sky and wondered just how many stars there are in space? This question has fascinated scientists as well as philosophers, musicians and dreamers throughout the ages. Look into the sky on a clear night, out of the glare of streetlights, and you will see a few thousand individual stars with your naked eyes. With even a modest amateur telescope, millions more will come into view."

"So how many stars are there in the Universe? It is easy to ask this question, but difficult for scientists to give a fair answer! Stars...are gathered together into vast groups known as galaxies. The Sun belongs to the Milky Way galaxy. Astronomers estimate there are about 100 thousand million stars in the Milky Way alone. Outside that, there are millions upon millions of other galaxies also, [with millions upon millions of stars in each of these galaxies]!" Our universe is so vast, it is beyond comprehension.

We are told in the Book of Genesis, that God promised to Abraham a vast number of descendants, as many as the stars. And as I looked again at who

these descendants were, I was struck by their great diversity. It is the story about a man named Abram, whose name would later be changed to Abraham. At this point in the story, Abram had lived a long full life and was now very old, and yet he had no children, no heir to carry on the family lineage after his death. It was looking like his death would mean the death of his entire family line, and the death of their way of life and their faith, a faith that they had brought to this new land so many years ago from Ur of the Chaldees. This thought weighed heavily on Abram, and it kept him awake many nights.

But then, God came to him one night. We read: “[God] brought [Abram] outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’” This is a story about a promise given to this old man Abram, that somehow, he would have a child and have a multitude of descendants. It was an impossible promise, given that he was now 100 years old. And yet, impossible as it seemed, God’s words lit a small spark of hope in Abram’s soul, which lightened his heavy heart.

Soon, his wife, old as well, miraculously conceived, and a year after having been given the promise from God, she bore a son to Abram. They named him Isaac, meaning, one who laughs or rejoices! Isaac would have a son named Jacob, and one of Jacob’s sons would be Judah, who was the ancestor of David the king, who the scriptures say would be the ancestor of the Jewish messiah.

But the promise God gave to Abram of a multitude of descendants was not just about Isaac and this messianic lineage. The promise to Abram was about many peoples and nations. After Isaac was born, Abram was given another son, shockingly, through his wife’s Egyptian slave, Hagar. This son was named Ishmael. And Ishmael would be the father of the Arabs. His children were Nebaioth, Kedar, Adbeel, Mibsam, Mishma, Dumah, Massa, Hadad, Tema, Jetur, Naphish, and Kedemah.

And from here, Abram's descendants would quickly grow and multiply. His son Isaac's children were Jacob and Esau; Jacob's children were the Israelites, they were Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Gad, Asher, Dan, Naphtali, Joseph, and Benjamin. Two of these children were from Jacob's wife Rachel, the rest were born to four other women. Esau's children were Eliphaz, Jeush, Jaalam, Korah, and Reuel. They formed the nation of the Edomites. And Abraham's family tree would grow and grow, from generation to generation to generation.

Count the stars Abraham, if you are able. So shall your descendants be. The promised family tree from Abram would split off in many directions including many people who formed various nations. All were related. All were descendants of Abraham. Abraham's descendants would be born from various unions; from men and their wives, and men and their slaves, and men and their concubines, and one man and a prostitute. They would grow to be the nations of Israel, and the Arabs, and Edomites, and many other peoples. Look at the stars Abram. So shall your descendants be.

But God's promise to Abram included more than the various nations' dwelling in the Lavant. It is a spiritual and religious story as well, of the Jewish and Muslim people. But it is a tale that includes Christianity also. The Jewish Rabbi Jesus was conversing one day with the religious leaders. These leaders had been speaking proudly of being descendants of Abraham. In response, Jesus reached down, picked up a stone, showed it to these religious leaders and said: *"do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham."* Jesus knew that the children of Abraham included more than those with Abraham's DNA.

It was Abraham's seed that birthed the Israelite and Arab and Edomite nations. His descendants were religiously Jews and Muslims. Jesus was himself a Jew, a son of Abraham. And through Jesus, a spiritual lineage

branched off, giving birth to a multitude of people and nations and even religions through the example of his life, suffering, death, and resurrection.

Twelve of Jesus' spiritual descendants, his original apostles, took his message in various directions; to the south and west along the southern coast of the Mediterranean, and north and west along the northern coast of the Mediterranean, and east into many foreign lands and nations and religions, proclaiming the Good News. A Jewish Pharisee named Saul succumbed to Jesus' message and love and life and changed his name to Paul. He took this same Good News into Turkey and Greece, and beyond, forming households of faith, and a new religion named Christianity. Even in our day, these stars of the heavens, these children of Abraham, continue to multiply through Israel and the Arabs and Edomites and Christians and you and me.

Knowing that this promise to Abram would include such a variety of ethnicities and cultures and skin tones and ways of living and speaking and worshipping must have filled God's heart with great joy. And yet at the same time it must have also broken God's heart, knowing how these various relations and religions would be at each other's throats time and time again down through history. How many times these children of Abraham, and children of the messiah, would shed each other's blood. Yet this sad tale of jealousy and animosity is much older than Abraham's lineage. For the Jewish people this story of hatred and blood reaches back to their origin story where Adam and Eve's son Cain killed his brother Abel. How many wars have been fought over these millennia amongst these brothers and sisters and cousins, and spiritual brothers and sisters and cousins? How much blood has been shed? How much suffering has been inflicted within this diverse family?

We don't have to look any further than our own Christian faith to see the blood that has been shed between various Christian sects, and the anger and mistrust and division between brothers and sisters in Christ. And in our

day, the heart of God breaks over what is happening in Israel and Palestine as these descendants of Abraham, these relatives are brutalizing one another, causing great suffering and starvation and death of the innocent.

“[God] brought [Abram] outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’” Instead of being a people at odds with one another, we pray that Abraham’s children, and Jesus’ children; the Jews and Muslims and Christians, and you and me, be, instead, instruments of love and healing and liberation and wholeness.