**Sermon 3-17-19**

**Paul Purdue preaching**

**Journeying with Doubts**

On our way to the Grand Canyon, we camped one night at Bryce Canyon National Park. We took shorter hikes to scenic overlooks, saving our energy for our upcoming hike to the bottom the Grand Canyon. We had additional tents, but found it easier for all five us to sleep in a poorly named 5-person tent. The five-person tent-testers are much smaller people than our five!.We slept shoulder to shoulder with Caleb, our youngest, laying like a guard across the threshold. Bryce Canyon is a dark space, far from electric lights, known for its night sky. The rangers enforce a no light policy. We cooked supper over a campfire and hiked to the canyon to watch a spectacular sunset. The fading sunlight radiated reds in canyon walls and a thousand shades from yellow to midnight purple in the clouds. We  waited for the once amazing clouds to clear. On average Bryce Canyon gets less than an inch of rain in June, but when it began to lightly rain, we gave up on the stars and headed to bed.

Around 3 am, nature called my name. I quietly detangled from my sleeping bag, found my glasses, avoided stepping on Connie, and tip-toed over Caleb, our deep sleeping tent guard. The cold cloudless night shook my deep slumber. On my return trip to my warm sleeping bag, I thought, “don't look up….don't look up at that night sky, you will never go to sleep.” “Don’t look up, for in 24 hours you will be on the trail carrying your pack to the bottom of the Grand Canyon.” “Don’t look up, you need your sleep, the stars at the Grand Canyon … “  “Don’t”... but I did look up! My quick peek, stopped me in my tracks, and turned me in slow panorama circle as I opened my eyes to the heavens. The Milky Way danced a slow, star-dusty groove. I thought of Abram and Saria: “Count the stars”, drink in the vast unboundedness. At some point, I slid on my beanie and gloves and laid down on a picnic table lost in wonder, love and praise. My mother once roused us from a tent at 3am to gaze at the moon beams making shadows in a Kentucky forest. At 4am, my shivers became shakes as the cold won out. I returned to the comfort of the sleeping bag, not thinking of the lost sleep I might regret, but knowing the glory of the night sky danced on above me and wondering if it was a sin not to wake my tent mates and drag them outside to see the heavenly vision.

“After these events, the Lord’s word came...” begins our tale. After what? After Sarai and Abram answer God’s call, “to go to a land yet unseen” and leave their homeland to wander way down to Egypt. After a sad separation from a scheming Lot. After battles and nomadic wandering, the flocks and hired hands now moved like a small army  After years, Abram and Saria have no biological heir. A trusted lieutenant will inherit the clan.

So “after these events, the Lord’s word came to Abram in a vision, ‘Don’t be afraid, Abram. I am your protector, shield, defender, I am your shield and your reward.’” Is not the deepest reward the presence of God? A vision of peace surpassing understanding, guarding your heart and mind is a deep reward. To know God is with us amid the journey is enough! Listen for the holy whisper that rebuffs our inner accessors, ”Do not be afraid, I am, I am Yahweh, your creator, your shield, your defender, your counsellor, your protector.

Some 53 percent of our global church won a political match; the NYT tell us people even cheated. They voted in enhanced enforcement, sentencing guidelines, and gracious exit provisions. Our Defender, the Ancient of Days, our Shield calls us to be a shield, a priest, a voice moving to the edges with acceptance and love. And so like Moses in the wilderness, Peter walking to Cornelius’ house, and Abram and Saria gazing at stars, we are navigating our journey through an unseen land. We are headed to a land that God will show us. Faith guides our next steps. We are unsure where God is leading. The spiritual life calls for times of wilderness wandering. Do not be afraid, God is our Protector and our Shield, a fiery pillar by night and a shimmering cloud by day. And yet, we, with our spiritual ancestors, question the unseen path, “Lord God, what can you possibly give me? Someone else will get all of this I have worked so hard to build?”

God draws Abram outside of his lambs’ wool, golden altared, Persian rugged, seven roomed, English butlered, glamping tent into the cold night air. Our Shield and Defender speaks, “Look up at the sky and count the stars... You can’t count them can you? Gaze on that milky stardust. These are your children, your legacy, the blessing you are becoming. Over at congregation Micah, down at the Islam center, and on the corner of 21st and Acklen… count the stars. Ponder God’s unbounded grandeur and love.”

Will we follow Christ into an unseen land or do we demand a map? The narrator tells us, “Abram trusted, believed, or fixed his heart upon God, and the Lord names Abram as righteous.” The Common English Study Bible notes that both Paul and James refer to this verse; Paul notes that Abram is counted righteous before circumcision. (Genesis 17:24). Paul interprets this verse to mean that God declared Abraham righteous because of his faith not because of his actions and observance of the law. Therefore circumcision isn't required of Gentiles to enter the kingdom of God. (Romans 4 and Galatians 3:6) James observes that Abram was obedient and interprets this verse to say that actions must accompany faith. Two Biblical visions, one verse.

Amid Abram’s fear, God whispers hope. Abram how far have you already traveled: “I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans… look around.” Perhaps, in our journey to an unseen land, we take stock of God’s leading. We might cherish this beautiful sanctuary, hover above it and walk through it. Our treasure arrives when two or three of us gather together in God’s name. Look in each other’s eyes- God with us- God is our reward!  Our spiritual ancestors first met in a wood tabernacle, long gone. On July 10, 1910, our spiritual ancestors held Belmont’s first worship service. The unseen residual power of that worship service shapes us today. Dr. Wilbur F. Tillett, the Dean of the Vanderbilt School of Religion, preached what the Nashville Banner described as “a stirring sermon” from Nehemiah. Dr. Tillett concluded: “I trust that however beautiful a temple may one day be erected in this part of the city, the members will always remember that the mission of every one of Christ's followers is to strengthen the manhood and womanhood of the world.” Gender inclusive preaching 46 years before the UMC would fully ordain women! Look around feel the wilderness wind at our back…  look up and count the stars.

But Abram said, “Lord God, how do I know that I will actually possess it?” God said, “Bring me a three-year-old female calf, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a dove, and a young pigeon.” Abram took all of these animals, split them in half, and laid the halves facing each other, but he didn’t split the birds. When vultures swooped down on the carcasses, Abram waved them off. Abram asked for a sign, and God answers not with the still small voice of private prayer, or Bible study, but with worship. God answers with a rite, with a rite

like Holy Communion, Ash Wednesday, or Good Friday. When we are in the wilderness, maybe in a wandering state,  the rites often hold us by symbol, song, silence, and sign.

Abram knows this now strange rite and sets to work. We do not know this liturgy.  Why only leave the birds in tact? Why only three year-old animals? Frankly, I am glad there is no liturgical guidance in our Book of Worship about chasing buzzards away. This strange rite is part of some now-lost ancient near east practice. The particular  liturgical dance steps have no meaning for us. Indeed, the exile moved worship away from the temple. The prophets offer new insights: “What should I think about all your sacrifices? says the Lord. I’m fed up with entirely burned offerings... learn to do good. Seek justice, help the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. (Isaiah 1) We have progressed theologically away from this rite, but powerful story of Abram’s experience with God remains!

Ultimately, we follow God, not a rite or rule. God matters more than the details. We celebrate God’s presence while rejecting animal sacrifice. Scientific insight and prophetic insight should always guide the church. We must not forget the New in our Testament. Now, let's take a little progressive test. You might be a progressive if you believe a round earth rotates around the sun! (Isaiah 11:12 speaks of four corners of Earth.) You might be a progressive if you do see evolution as part of creation! You might be a progressive if you reject passages supporting slavery, believe women should preach, and think divorced people can remarry!

So Abram chases away the buzzards and after the sunset, Abram slept deeply. A terrifying and deep darkness settled over him. Do the stars shine brightest during the deepest darkness? After the sun set and Abram’s funk deepened, a smoking vessel with a fiery flame passed between the split-open animals. As Abram anxiously dreamed, God tended to the feast. God took up the rite tending the sacrificial fires. Our hardest, most terrifying times come in transition, in traveling to unseen unknown lands, in our trusting God enough to take the next step even when we do not know where it leads. An unseen God moves about in the dark and the new. Do not be afraid, God is with us, our Shield, our Defender, our Savior. Go outside and count the stars. Amen.