

Up until now, the relationship between Abraham and God has gone like this: God talks. Abraham listens. God says Abraham? Abraham says Yes God. God says go. Abraham says where. Abraham is that faithful ancestor who sets an example of unquestioning obedience above all else. Until the passage from Genesis today.

The ancient promise that compelled Abraham to move his entire household across vast deserts is starting to making him think. I can't help but believe that God was actually pleased at finally getting a little pushback!

Abraham says, "Wait a minute, God; you promise, and I believe and you promise again. You promise to "make me a great nation." You promise to give this land to my offspring. Well, guess what? We still have no offspring! I have no heir except the child I had with my slave. I'm really starting to wonder, God, if you can do what you promise.

So God brought him out into the night sky and bid him look upward. God gave Abraham an object lesson: "Do you see all those stars in that limitless darkness? That's how many children you will have. I promise."

Finally. Abraham could see God's promise splashed across the sky. It had always been there, whether or not Abraham could see it or believe it. Abraham wanted one child; God's promise was for limitless generations. And in God's time, *God's good time*, that's what he got. The image of stars on a field of black nothingness turned into generations of people. The same stars we see each night. (When it's clear, that is.)

The scriptures would be so much less interesting, without rich imagery and metaphors. They enliven our understanding. The images connect our thinking and imagining with very real things. There are lots and lots of words in the bible. The words may stay with us or not but the images are sure to remain.

The rainbow in the heavens seals God's promise to always give us another chance. An object lesson still with us after a summer rain shower.

The image of a baby in a manger promises, as every baby does, hope for the future. An object lesson which returns in force each Holiday season or each time a newborn cry is heard for the first time.

Jesus as the good shepherd gently holding lambs and leading them home is a promise of safety and comfort. A promise which becomes more real as we lay a loved one to rest, and recite the 23rd psalm.

My image of God is forever imprinted in my mind by the artwork introduced to me as a child in Sunday School. (To this day, it's an effort for me to think about God in any way other than a white haired, bearded man in the clouds.)

Throughout the book of psalms --- we are introduced to images of God that are so very different than that: a rock, a shield, a fortress, a light. Just think of all the ways the psalms describe God.

If you have never been to the Cathedral of the Madeleine, the Roman Catholic cathedral in Salt Lake, I encourage you to make a pilgrimage there this Lent. The Symbolism will astound you, along with the beauty of the space.

Here's what I remember --- and it may not be exactly accurate as I didn't get there this week to verify my impression. But it's very close. Behind the altar, below the vault of angels with red wings and stars, is a painting of God the father, as a beautiful, old kindly gentleman, holding up the arms of his beloved son on the cross, supported on the back of a dove, the Holy Spirit. Below that, you will find an image of a mother pelican and her chicks.

There is a story that when food is scarce, a mother pelican will pierce her breast with her beak until she bleeds, and feed her chicks that way. It is an enduring image of self-sacrifice and of course has been attached to our concept of Christ's sacrifice for us and nurture of us in the Eucharist.

In the books of the Hebrew testament prophets, God has been portrayed as having characteristics of the animals which he created: as "an eagle who stirs up its nest and hovers over its young; as it spread its wings, takes them up and bears them aloft on its pinions." ⁱ In Hosea, God is so angry he tells the prophet that he will "fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs."ⁱⁱ In Isaiah God even says he will cry out "like a woman in labor."¹ And reminds us he will not forget us, "can a woman forget her nursing child?"²

And then today, as Jesus laments those lost in Jerusalem, he grieves who have sought to harm him, wishing that he could gather them up and hold them close to him as a mother hen gathers her chicks under her wings. Offers us an image of ultimate concern and compassion.

The ultimate image we carry with us is the cross. In Episcopal churches, we tend not to keep the image of a crucified Jesus before us year round. The cross remains empty because we are a post-resurrection people. We are, indeed, a resurrection people, living resurrection lives. The *empty* cross has become a powerful object lesson to us: it reminds us that because of Jesus sacrifice for us, we have a relationship with God (the vertical bar) which leads to a relationship with each other. It also reminds us that we are God's very own object lesson for the world – the ultimate metaphor: the Body of Christ is no longer on the cross in humiliation but face to face with the world, being God's love to everyone we meet, every suffering we encounter.

Take with you today the images of scripture: the stars, which God envisions us as, beautiful lights in a sea of darkness. The rich imagery of the scripture is balanced by the rich imagery which surrounds on every side. Be good stewards of the imagination

¹ Isaiah 42:14

² Isaiah 49: 15

God gave you to imagine God close, and God within, and God's promise carrying us forward in mission. Look for images of God everywhere as object lessons for your life. *Once you start looking, you'll see them every time you turn around.*

During this season of Lent, explore new images of God and God's love which will lead to new understandings along our path. Rest in an image which conjures up the limitless love God offers.

The very same stars God showed Abraham are still there and perhaps are a sign to us to remember that our dreams for ourselves (such as Abraham's one son) might be so much less that God has in mind for us (limitless generations). The stars are always there, during the daylight as well as in the night, still there to remind us that God considers us to be stars, lights in the darkness, living tokens of his promise of blessing.

May we be the object lesson God had in mind.

May we be object lessons of God's love and faithfulness to the world.

ⁱ Deut. 32:10-11, NRSV

ⁱⁱ Hosea 13:8, NRSV