

[BLANK] [PRAYER] May the LORD have mercy, my beloved siblings in Christ. May Christ have mercy, for us, and for all of God’s children. May the LORD have mercy, for all of God’s children yet to come into this world, and for all who have left it. I had hoped that today would be a Sunday when I could bring you complete Christian joy from the bottom of my heart. And I will do that, to the best of my ability, today, but it is hard for me to do that, today, at a time when my heart is heavy with the loss of human life in Christchurch, New Zealand, ended by tragic violence, violence that ended the lives of people who only wanted to worship God in peace.

And yet, as always, our Holy Bible gives us comfort, and hope, in the middle of human loss. Today, in our reading from the Hebrew book of Genesis, we are reminded that a man named Abram, a selfless man, who turned away from wealth, and war, and tit-for-tat justice, was visited by the God of heaven and earth. Abram was defenseless, and our God offered to him God’s protection as a shield. Abram and his wife Sarai were childless, and our God offered to them both more generations of children from them than there were stars in the evening sky.

Abram heard these promises from the God of heaven and earth. There was no reason for Abram to believe God. His line had come to an end. There was nothing worth taking, because, after all, he had no children to give things to. And yet, this insignificant man, blessed by the high priest Melchizedek, for his selfless defense of defenseless people, became the most significant person in the history of faith, because Abram, who God would rename Abraham, decided to believe in unbelievable promises from a loving God. God would protect him, and God would help countless generations of believers who shared Abram’s faith to come from him, including Jews, and Christians, and Muslims. Score one for Abram, said our God. Abram is willing to love me, and to trust me, when everything seems hopeless, so that faith may live.

In faith, we cannot always get our hands around the scope, and the meaning, of God’s promises so easily. We are just everyday people. We can only see so far ahead, so far around, so far below, and so far above. When God said to Abram that he would have more generations of children than there were stars in the sky, Abram, like most of us, would have been lucky to count five thousand stars, on a good, clear night. There were uncountable stars out there. But Abram couldn’t see them, much less guess at them. God makes promises to us that seem to be impossible, even ridiculous. But that doesn’t mean that they’re not out there.

[STARS] Forty-four years, ago, I was in a field on a starry night, when I was a camp counselor at Camp Aldersgate, in Swartswood, New Jersey. It was for a summer camp program run by The United Methodist Church, and it was my third summer there as a counselor. I had gone from having vague ideas about my faith, to a deeper understanding of faith. I had started to feel God move in my heart more loudly. I had started to learn what it was like to be a member and a leader of a faith community bringing young people to Christ.

The sky that night was amazing. Comets were flying everywhere. The stars were

shining brightly. I read to our campers from the book of Genesis, about how God had created the heavens and the earth. And, we started to talk together about our amazing God. None of us that night could count more stars than Abram did. But we all had a sense that night of how great our God was.

And then, something happened. The camp managers came up the hill from the camp lodge to tell us to quiet down, and to go to bed. And when they said that, something happened in me. It's hard to describe to you, really. It wasn't anger. It wasn't defiance. It was what I can only describe to you as a movement of God's Holy Spirit. All of a sudden, I jumped off of my sleeping bag, I threw down my flashlight, and these words that came from God came out of my mouth: “Christ knows no hour! Christ knows no hour!” I was shocked. The camp managers were shocked. And, the kids were shocked, and amazed. They went running around the next day, shouting, “Christ knows no hour! Christ knows no hour!” It was an amazing thing.

And as I got the kids to settle down for a good night's rest under the stars, God awakened in my heart a promise. Like Abram, counting stars on a starry night, thousands of years ago, God promised to me, as God has promised to countless servants of God through these years, that I would be part of birthing countless generations of people of faith. There was no way that I could understand how this would be, any more than Abram could, or anyone else could. But I believed. And, a day at a time, I responded. [BLANK]

I was asked by God to believe this promise, even though I failed miserably in my first attempt at going to seminary, after finishing college. I was asked by God to believe this promise, even when it became apparent that June-Ann and I would have no grandchildren. I was asked by God to believe in this promise, even after I struggled to understand the unbelievable loss of friends and co-workers at the World Trade Center, a place where I was supposed to have been on September 11, 2001. I was asked by God to believe in this promise, when, one day, sixteen years ago, I walked into a United Methodist Church, to start a life of Christian discipleship, and respond to God's promise. I was asked by God to believe in this promise, when, nearly broke, and looking at the one good chance that could turn my business around, I put it aside, and picked up a folder to apply to a seminary, yet again, six years ago.

And, now, by God's grace, and by the grace of God's many people who have helped me to heal, and to grow, as a person, as a Christian disciple, and as a Pastor, I will be commissioned by our New York Annual Conference in June as a Provisional Elder in our church. In that field in New Jersey, under those stars, I could not have possibly imagined what this journey would look like. I just believed in it. And, by God's grace, God has reckoned it to me, as God has reckoned it to so many others, as righteousness.

My life in faith, now, is about believing in the next generation. We will all be gone, soon enough. Will God's vision for us to bring to new generations to faith be limited by the stars that we can count in the sky? Or, will it be limited only by our willingness to believe that God counts stars better than we do? We'll never visit all of those stars, ever. But, by God's grace, we can spread the wings of our faith, and start to

live lives that lead us to Easter promises, Easter hopes, Easter joys, that will help us to pass on something of immense and lasting value, for generations to come, something greater than all of God’s stars: faith.

Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ knows this. Jesus gave us the example of how we can fulfill Abram’s promises. In Luke’s gospel, Jesus was sad, like so many of us are sad today, because the people of Jerusalem were unprotected by people more interested in politics and passions than the promises of God. Like the gunman in Christchurch, just the latest in generations of people killing innocent people of faith, Jesus faced an insane world, ready to kill the righteous movement of God’s Holy Spirit, that Jesus had brought to earth, from heaven.

[HEN] Jesus wanted none of this. Ever. Jesus wanted to gather all of God’s people, unshielded against a world of sin, and bring them under his wings, like a hen brings in her chicks under her wings. Think of it. Jesus, the Son of God, Son of the maker of heaven and earth, wanted to be like a hen. What chance does a hen have against a fox? Not much. But by taking a chance, by defending her chicks against the fox, her chicks have a chance. This is what a man named Jesus wanted to do, so that we could help generations to come alive, in Christ, forever. **[BLANK]**

Be like God. Let’s say it, yet again. Be. Like. God. We are here to find Christian hope, and Christian joy. We are here to look beyond the latest gunman, the latest hatred, the latest temptations, the latest sorrows, and to believe in amazing promises from God, promises that grow when we commit to being the ones who will help to create the next generation of faith-filled people, people who will help the world to believe in the promises of God’s, again, and again. It is not easy. It takes time. It takes the willingness to believe in things that we will never be able to count, much less see. It takes the willingness to be like God, a God who is, already, tugging at our hearts, asking us to look towards the promise of Easter sunlight. The dawn is coming. The stone on a cold grave is about to roll away. Let’s help the next generation to believe in that promise. Amen.