

Genesis 15:1-6

A month and a half ago, when the derecho hit Iowa, our power went out at exactly 11:30 AM. I sighed and prepared to be very mature and patient, although I noted nervously that my laptop was at only 35% of its battery. An hour later the electricity had not come on. Two hours later Tom and I had taken a walk through the neighborhood and seen power lines down on every block and trees resting on the roofs of houses. We were beginning to catch on that the damage would take a while to repair. As the hours rolled by, we marshalled more and more coping strategies. I remembered to breathe, to keep everything in proportion, to recognize that nobody would blame me or suffer unduly if I failed to stay on schedule. I was extremely mature about the whole thing.

But I'm here to tell you, when the power came back on exactly 50 hours later, I felt like it had been two weeks. I'd already made fruitless trips looking for ice to keep our food fresh and driven around to charge my phone. And charged my laptop at Terri's office. It wasn't that bad things had actually happened, but I hadn't known how long I'd have to be ingenious and mature and patient, and the uncertainty was really hard to take. In retrospect, 50 hours is nothing, but none of us knew what the timeline would be.

So I totally feel for Abram in this story. Ever since Chapter 12 he and Sarai have been on this wide-open road to who-knows-where that God has set them on, counting on the promise that God would make of them a great people, and so far that's all they have, a promise. God shows up in a vision, and Abram wastes no time in bringing up what's on his mind: "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." I mean, they've spent *years* counting on this promise, and nothing has reversed their aging or Sarai's barrenness yet.

So God shows Abram the stars in the sky and says, “Your progeny will be this numerous.” And Abram believes God, and “God reckoned it to him as righteousness.” This short excerpt from the Abraham story shows us how Abraham and God are constantly pulling on each other. God makes a promise, Abraham follows, then doubts and calls God out, God reinforces the promise, and it goes on. I think we can all identify with Abraham, never fully satisfied that things are going to turn out okay, but trying to be patient and mature about it. And in fact you see that appreciation in God’s response to Abraham, too, when “God reckoned [Abram’s rekindled belief] to him as righteousness.”

In Jewish tradition this “reckoning” is sort of like putting merit into the credit side of the ledger for Abraham. Just as in any relationship, you try to build up some social capital so that if things sour, the other person will retain a reservoir of trust in you, so imagine Abraham’s social capital with God. Now God came to Abram in a vision and said, “I’m your shield,” and Abram said, “I don’t really have any problems that require a shield; my problem is that I have no progeny.” And God rolled with that one and said, “Look at the stars,” and Abraham said, “Okay, I’ll keep trusting you,” *and God counted that into Abraham’s credit column.* I’m sorry, but I know a thing or two about grade inflation, and I don’t think that was a dispassionate assessment. I think God *wanted* to count it as merit. I think God cooks the books.

One of the differences between us and God is that we exist in time and God exists beyond time. In this story, God seems to remember this, and sympathize with Abraham’s anxiety. If Abraham doesn’t have kids, it doesn’t matter how wealthy he is; the wealth goes away at his death. Kids are your only way of living on. God appreciates Abraham’s point of view, and gives him what he needs, at least for that day. The drama continues, as we know, but

Abraham has what he needs to keep going for now.

Anne Lamott recalls her desperation during her pregnancy, needing to know that she would be able to handle being a mother.

I wrote this question down and put it in a little God box and said to Jesus, I am not going to do anything until I hear from you. You really need to get back to me on this, and I'm going to keep my sticky hands off the control of the spaceship until I hear from you.

I tap my foot and look at my watch and feel like I've been so patient and enough already.

I always think, would it be so much skin off of God's nose to just get back to me in a more obvious way? Surrendering is so scary because everything we've learned has been to not let go, to not drop the ball.

She didn't have much choice *but* to wait, though, and in a few weeks she had a dream that, when she awoke, assured her that she'd be fine. Of course, just like Abraham, the drama went on. That dream did not take care of motherhood once and for all. But apparently it was enough for the present moment.

During Judaism's High Holy Days, which began yesterday with Rosh Hashanah, part of the liturgy names God as the Rememberer of all that's been forgotten. This is especially powerful in the context of the Abraham story, because you know, even if you do have kids to keep your memory alive, within three generations or so there won't be anybody left who remembers you, not as a personality. And yet, as the book of Ecclesiastes says, God has put eternity into our minds—we know that we have limits that are exceeded. So at some point we just have to give over to God what we cannot grapple with mentally or emotionally. We know there's eternity but we can't live into it or put it into perspective or place ourselves in it—it's just beyond us. God gets it, that's all we know. God will remember us when we've been forgotten; we live in God because God is not constrained by time, and always knows us.

Like Abraham, we live with a certain level of chronic anxiety. We don't know what's

going to happen, and we do care, often desperately, about what will happen. This text indicates that God kind of gets that about us and has some sympathy for it—that if we cannot grasp the big picture or know the end of the story, God will still give us a vision of the stars in the sky or a dream about our baby that helps us move a little farther forward into the promise.

Anne Lamott also talked, in this interview, about when prayers are not answered. If you didn't already know her, you might find her response a little pat, but I know she's no Pollyanna.

She said,

I have a part of me--the part that isn't neurotic and grasping and furious and begging--a part of me that is a very quiet, more mature, slightly wiser self. That has sprung very much from having lost a few people that I absolutely and simply couldn't survive without. . . .

That wisdom has sprung mostly from getting older and realizing, you know, the Rolling Stones said, "You don't always get what you want, but you get what you need."

I think today's story about Abraham is telling us, Rest into the promise of God, and when you can't, God will take what we do manage and reckon it to us as righteousness. Furthermore, as acutely as we perceive the risks and dangers ahead—and as correct as we may be—we do not see as far as God does. It's not a copout or intellectually dishonest to accept that our vision is limited and that, when we've done all we can do and things are getting worse, it's still within the scope of God's power to bring the promise to full fruition.

If I was a God, or at least if I was God's West Coast representative--because I secretly believe I would be an excellent representative—I will go to the grave with the belief that my ideas are good ideas, with 50 years of evidence to the contrary--if I were God, I would have a different system. I would have email, you would pray and you would get email responses or voicemail responses. You could reach a certain point of having suffered or having had to be in limbo. Then you would graduate and God would say, "Well done, faithful servant."

Then you would get all these spiritual coupons you could use if things got tough again.

But it's like Augustine: you start over every day again in your relationship with God. . . .

You try to let go, you try to be a little tiny bit more silly and playful and enjoy it more, try to remember to breathe more, try to remember to get out of your self, be a person for others more. You try to just trust

that even though it doesn't make sense, God has a plan and that, even sort of begrudging way, you're game, you're in.

<https://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/christianity/2006/05/anne-lamott-on-jesus-i-didnt-want->

[him.aspx](#)

God of the covenant,

As you promised Abraham descendants as numerous as the stars, you have also promised us that we might live under those stars as your people, faithful and loved. Help us to cope with uncertainty and fear, and to nurture all your children with whom we share the same canopy of sky night after night. Amen.