



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"Look at the Stars!"**
Comment: Insert Comment here
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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Genesis 1-12,17-18
Second Reading Philippians 3:17-4:1
Gospel Luke 13:31-35

I recall quite distinctly a family vacation we took when I was a very young man. We were out in the country in Indiana at a place I think called Turkey Run. The hotel we were staying at organized various activities appropriate to the countryside: sports, hiking, swimming, and one that interested me for its novelty: star gazing. I'd never done this, and although it was mostly science fiction that interested me in stars at the time, I signed up for the event. I dutifully bought my little book of star charts and that night took my place with the others, mostly adults, as we lay on blankets and looked up into the heavens.

However, it didn't take too long for me to realize that something was wrong. The guide would describe this or that constellation and point at this or that part of the night sky. The rest of the group would ooh and aah and consult their star charts to find the name and mythological designation of the various stars and galaxies, and agreed that this was all a most interesting way to spend a summer's night. I, for my part, could see nothing: just a very dark sky up there above the trees. I felt confused, and asked for help, but I felt even more ashamed as the guide tried to guide my finger up to find a particular pattern and I still saw nothing at all.

That autumn I began high school and was required to take the routine medical tests to check my health. One afternoon I put my head into a black metal device and was told to tell the nurse when I saw the red light. My continued silence actually annoyed the woman who seemed to treat my near-sightedness as a personal fault. Again I was ashamed because I couldn't see like others. But a week later I had glasses, I passed the test, and that night for the first time in my life, I saw stars.

When I hear the passage from Genesis that we had as our first lesson today, I remember my experience with the Indiana night sky. No, Abraham wasn't quite like me: he certainly could see the stars. Those who grow up in desert countries tend to see the nighttime heavens very well indeed. I am told this is true of those who spend much of their time at sea, too. But Abraham had never before seen the stars as God was showing them to him that night. Instead of points of light in the sky, believed by ancient people to be little windows into the outer heavens above the dome of the known world, or even the distant suns and planets that we now know them to be, the billions of stars were also a sign from God.

When God first spoke to Abraham, then still known as Abram, it was in a different time and place. He was told to leave where he was and take his family on a journey to a yet undisclosed location: a place that would be his and his descendents for ever. Perhaps God told him this at night, under the same stars that Abraham would later be shown as the sign of God's promise. But at that time, when God's demands seemed very vague, if Abram looked at the sky he would have seen only the darkness of fear and uncertainty; he would have seemed very, very small in a vast universe, and utterly unequal to the task of being an agent of God Himself.

It is not too long after this that God speaks to Abraham again in the story we have just heard: but things aren't much better for him. He does not yet have an heir and this is a big tragedy for a man in the Middle East even today. A man's name lives on in his children, and someone dying childless will hardly be considered blessed by God.

But the Lord shows Abram those stars and, for the first time, this friend of God can see them clearly not only as points of light, but as the sign of the infinity of God's mercy, the strength of His promise, and the assurance that even the cultural needs of this desert chieftain would be met; he would have many sons and grandsons (and obviously daughters, too!): as many as the stars of the sky.

I have already mentioned to you that one of the ways to keep a good Lent is to get to know God better and to talk to Him more. This may have sounded too glib to some of you. Many people don't feel at all comfortable about talking to Someone who may or may not even exist! So the first step is not necessarily "shooting the breeze" with the Creator, but just establishing a line of communication. To do that requires a bit of imagination: not to "imagine" that God exists, but to begin to see where and how He might reveal Himself to you personally. It might involve looking at friendships, family relationships, your work, or your play. It might mean looking at your past and finding the clues there to the plans God has had for you. (That's how it usually works for me: I'm lousy at imagining what God has in store for me, but I am fascinated at looking back at the seeming patterns He has woven into the fabric of my life!)

However one does this, the establishment of a new relationship with God involves seeing things in new and different ways, and not being afraid to discover that perhaps all you needed was a little help, a "new pair of glasses" as it were, to see the stars. That help is found in Jesus Christ, who came to give us better vision of ourselves by loving us both for who we were and who we could become in Him. And it is found in the community of Christians who are here to help one another form and maintain their relationships with God through Christ. And it is found in our sacred writings, the Bible, and the lives of great saints who were the special friends of God: lots of help, really, and all at our disposal if we give our relationship with God the time and energy it deserves.

Now we must be careful how we use this insight. Abraham's belief that Israel was to belong to him and his descendents has been the source of much agony and bloodshed in the so-called Promised Land during the last sixty years and it shows no

sign of abetting. So too with our own beliefs in what God intends, wills or commands. It might be something very different that we initially think, and equally dangerous if we are not open to redirection. But equally dangerous is the belief that just because you can't see it now, God has nothing planned for you except a life of meaninglessness, pain or uncertainty. That's certainly just as sad as a little boy who thought that the stars were there for everyone but him. But he got glasses...and so can you.