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Genesis 15:1-6
Pentecost 9

WHEN YOU HAVE NOTHING ELSE TO HANG ON TO... HANG ON TO GOD'S WORD

He stepped out from the warmth of his tent into the cool desert night. A light breeze brushed his face. A wisp of smoke curled across his nostrils from the still-glowing embers of the cooking fire. All was quiet except for the occasional bleat of a sheep in the darkness or the snort of a camel tied up nearby. The voices of his night herdsmen wafted toward him as they talked to each other in low, inaudible tones. He shivered slightly and pulled his cloak more tightly around him. He looked up. The nighttime desert sky was magnificent. How long had it been since he'd really taken it all in? His nephew Lot lived in the city down in the valley where the streets were so lit up it was hard to appreciate the stars as fully. But out here in the wilderness stars dusted the entire sky like countless gleaming grains of sand, so bright it felt like you could reach up and grab a handful.

As his mind drifted in the darkness between the stars and the earth there came a voice, a voice he knew, a voice that filled the whole universe and yet spoke to him alone. "Look up, Abram. Look at the stars. Look at them, Abram. Can you count them? Can you count how many stars there are? That's how numerous your descendants will be."

The reading from Hebrews chapter 11 today says, *Faith is being sure about what we hope for, being convinced about things we do not see.*

Abram saw the stars. But he did not see children. He desired the blessing of children as much as any warm-blooded husband. But that wasn't what really ate away at him. The concern was that God had promised that the Savior of the world would come from Abram's body.

[Three weeks ago we heard the account of when the Lord and two angels visited Abraham and Sarah. Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was 90 and when the Lord repeated the promise to give them a son Sarah laughed. This is a prequel to that event. God had first engaged with Abram when Abram was 75 years old. And now in this reading Abram is around 80 or 85 years of age. His name has not yet been changed to Abraham. It is still Abram. And Sarah is still Sarai.]

The thing gnawed away at Abram's thoughts day and night. You see, when you are told that all of humankind through all of history is depending on something that is coming from your body – a good deal of pressure comes with that! No doubt, Abram kept assuring Sarai that God's plan would happen. But so often he wasn't so sure himself. Why wasn't anything happening? A year would pass, and another year, and another

year. Seeing no alternatives, Abram figured everything would default to his estate manager, Eliezer. Is that what God really meant to happen?

God anticipated and understood Abram's state of mind. God broached this conversation and breached the dam of Abram's pent-up anxiety. The words came gushing out. Genesis 15 says, *The word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." But Abram said, "O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir." [The Lord took Abram outside] and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars -if indeed you can count them." Then he said to [Abram], "So shall your offspring be." Abram believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness.*

Believing God made Abram righteous, or shall we say it made Abram right, because God's Word is always right, God's Word is always reality, and always puts us in a right way with God -even when circumstances appear to be the opposite. When Abram had nothing else to hang on to, he hung on to God's Word. It is through faith in God's Word that we receive all the things God's Word promises.

Abram believed God and at the age of 100 Abram did father a son, just as God promised. He named him Isaac. Abraham's faith in God's promise proved not to be foolhardy. Isaac would have two sons. Those two sons would have many more descendants until Abram became the ancestor of many nations. Most significantly He became the father of all the Jews and so he did become the ancestor of the Savior Jesus Himself.

For Abram, believing God's promise that he would have a son was no different from believing God's promise to send a Savior. Abram was saved through faith in the same Savior by which you and I are saved. The only difference is that Abram's faith trusted forward to that Savior and our faith trusts back to the Savior.

Since it is through faith in Jesus we are saved, Abram is dubbed the father of all believers. If you think of it that way, his spiritual descendants are exponentially more numerous than even his physical descendants. God's Word was true. God did not lie. Physically and spiritually - Abram's descendants are as numerous as the stars in the sky. Abram had had no earthly assurance to hang on to. He had nothing but God's Word.

Like Abram, when you have nothing else to hang on to... hang on to God's Word. You've never seen Jesus, but God's Word says that He has come. You didn't see Him die on the cross. Nor did you see Him rise again, but God used eyewitnesses to write down the truth for you that Jesus lives. Hang on to God's Word.

When you have nothing else to hang on to... when you would like to be righteous like Abram, but everything you do, no matter how faithfully, is always tainted – is always tainted by a begrudging attitude, by a short temper, by a lackluster heart, by a thirst for praise, by a need to

control, or by an unholy impulse -when everything about you -even the good things you do -are polluted by sin so that God could never, without reservation, give you His wholehearted nod of approval -when you are conscious of this reality, then dismiss what you're feeling and hang on to God's Word. The Bible says, *As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.* His Word is right. And faith in His Word makes you right-eous. When you have nothing else to hang on to, hang on to God's Word.

When you have nothing else to hang on to... we have all languished in grief. We have all seen hopes crumble and dreams turn to ashes. But beauty for ashes is God's exchange. It is your sins for his forgiveness, your tragedy and hurt for His balm of healing, your sorrow for His joy, your lostness for His wisdom, your emptiness for His Spirit, your brokenness for His perfection. Hang on to God's Word. He promises, *Never will I leave you. Never will I forsake you.* He promises to turn your tears into dancing. He promises He is the husband to the widow and the father to the fatherless. He promises, *I will deliver you and you will honor me.* He promises, *Whoever believes in me will live even though he is dying!!*

God specifically gave to Abram the stars as a sign: this is how many your descendants will be. When you consider the stars -how unimaginably massive each one is, how no two are the same, how they are beyond counting and yet the Bible says God calls each one by name -would it have been too crazy to think that our God could have created millions, even billions, of descendants from one dried up old man?

Abram believed God.

This same God gives you an even better sign, something far more magnificent than the stars. He gives you the Holy Spirit in Baptism. He gives you His Son's body and blood in the Lord's Supper. Even when you feel you're out of options, like you have nothing else to hang on to, aren't the creative possibilities of your God to work salvation endless?

Hang on to His Word.