

God draws near: Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Luke 13:31-35

by [Katherine A. Evensen](#) in the [February 23, 2010](#) issue

It turns out that the center of the Milky Way may smell like rum and taste a bit like raspberries. Ethyl formate, one of the molecules that gives raspberries their flavor and rum its smell, has been found in space. In a way this is hardly remarkable. After all, it's no surprise that we are made of the same stuff as the stars. And yet there's poignancy to this new piece of knowledge, poignancy in knowing that the beauty of the galaxies is as intimate, near and sublime as eating raspberries on a clear summer night.

This week's Genesis text also speaks of a touching presence and an unfathomable grandeur. After the fiasco in the garden, God was present but often in some mediated form or another: in burning bushes, in angel visitations, in the voice of prophets or, in Abram's case, a vision. Even without setting his eyes on the face of God, Abram had every reason to be afraid. He was worried because he and his spouse, Sarai, had remained childless and now Sarai, stuck in time as we all are, was getting on in years. But God dragged Abram outside, pointed to the sky, and made him a promise: "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. So shall your descendents be."

Abram was looking at the Milky Way, and you can bet dollars to donuts that the light sent by those stars still has not reached earth to find us in this 21st century. What happened between God and Abram on that night centuries ago is a mere moment in time for the stars. For us their light is a promise of things to come.

God's habit is to draw near. This God who created light with a single command is also a God who will not let us go. There seems to be no good reason for God to draw near to us except God's sheer love for creation. There appears to be no traceable metric that drives God to become flesh in Christ. Although we, being broken and frail and prone to death, confess that we desperately need this incarnation of God, we can find no reason for God to become bone and blood and vulnerable other than God's magnificent love. After having decided to whisper all things into being, to create raspberries and stars, to shape time and hope, God has also chosen to take on our lives with all their quirks, sins and finalities.

We see Jesus lamenting the fate of Jerusalem, a complicated city where prophets bemoan that God is betrayed by “you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones” (Micah 3:2). In Jerusalem God’s glory will be revealed (“the moon will be abashed, and the sun ashamed,” it says in Isaiah 24:23) and in Jerusalem Abram’s descendants will be scattered like dust and stars.

We cannot but remember the risky and foolish constancy of God’s love through the generations. For Luke, this strange city is laden with import and history and meaning; it’s also the place for beginnings and endings. It is a place of promise. Here the writer of Luke begins his story, here Jesus will be betrayed and here, at the edge of the city, he will be put to death. After Jesus rises, he will announce that it is from Jerusalem that the good news of “repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations” (Luke 24:47). Here God will choose to make God’s love known to all who exist through Christ.

There is something heartbreaking about both these stories. On one hand there is Abram, who wonders if God will fulfill a promise despite discouragement and against all odds. On the other hand there is God, who in fulfilling that promise laments that the people have never fully trusted that promise. Woven throughout the biblical narrative is this tension between God’s faithfulness and our doubt, God’s unimaginable love for us and our inability to let go of our ourselves to live fully in that love or trust that, despite appearances, God will not leave us or fail us. In Christ, God longs to gather all his children, as a hen gathers her brood. Only a deep, resistant, stubborn and foolish love can speak like this, only a love that is willing to give all, risk all. Only a God who enters into death can promise that there is nothing in the whole universe that can separate us from who God is.

In Christ we know that God did not want to remain in the heavens. Infinity folds upon itself even as flesh and light, breath and time are born. Though the promise given to Abram has never ended, never changed, God chose to become that self-limited, particular promise in Christ. God chose to enter our particular time and place and love us with a wild and magnificent love, even though we are difficult creatures to love. The universe has been jarred: dust and light and bone, rum and resurrection and redemption are loosed into time and space. Now our sorrow and our hopes are taken into God. The only thing that remains fixed, the sole certainty, is a heartbreaking promise, a magnificent love.