

When I served as a camp counselor for a few summers at Lutheran Memorial Camp, just north of Columbus, by far the most nerve-racking time was late Sunday afternoons. We would sit on the porch of the cabin we would be staying in that week, and we would *anxiously* await the arrival of our campers whom we would be responsible for the next six days. Now, we would have a list of their names, ages, if they were coming with a group of others from their church, if they were coming for Confirmation or something else, if their pastor would be staying on the grounds. Just so you know, it was always better when everyone in your cabin was from the same church: they already knew each other, they knew their place in their respective group, there would be less all-around awkwardness. Of course, that could, also, lead to problems if they decided as a group to hate the fact they had to come to camp for an entire week out of their precious summer. We never knew what we were getting ourselves into that week as we sat on our porch with dread and hope combined.

And, then, there was this one week, when we hit the jackpot. I was joining a female camp counselor to lead this group of boys and girls through Bible studies, games, meals at the lodge, hikes out into the woods. They

weren't there as part of some Confirmation requirement. They had never met each other before. They were middle school age students, who, actually, wanted to be there. We hit the goldmine of church camp history: young boys and girls who were so well-behaved, participated equally in activities, engaged in Bible studies, asked meaningful questions. You have to understand: this does not happen. It is an unwritten rule, especially with junior-highers: that there's going to be chaos, frustration, even questioning the basic decency of humanity from time-to-time. These precious ones broke the rules in a completely different way.

So, the other camp counselor and I decided to take advantage of this miracle that could rival Jesus walking on water. After our last campfire with the rest of the young people who were there at camp that week, we took our group to the open field in the middle of the camp, and had them lay down and look up at the stars in the ever-so-clear sky that night, with the premise being Abram's encounter with God in the Genesis story we heard this morning.

Because, I like to think what God *really* said to Abram when he looked up at the stars in the clear night sky; I like to think God *dared* Abram to count the stars. I like to think God dared Abram to imagine the possibilities this

world has to offer. I like to think God dared Abram to realize just how small he truly was in the grand scheme of the entire universe, and yet this massive God was, still, having a personal, in-depth, life-fulfilling moment with a plain 'ole human being.

In a way, we dared the middle school students to not necessarily count the stars (we liked them, yes, but we didn't like them enough to stay up all night with them). We dared them to imagine *their* possibilities. We dared them to consider as if they are already loved by God: *not* when they finish Confirmation, *not* when they graduate from high school, *not* when they contribute something to society, *not* when they fulfill the hopes and dreams of their respective families and congregations. They were already loved, and not because their camp counselors said so, but because God said so. And God did not reiterate it that night from some distant sky, but laying right there beside them, knowing full well what they were going through in their life, knowing full well that, even though we thought they were near-perfect; God knew their imperfections, and loved them in spite of it all.

We may not like to think God has much of an attitude with us, but I like to think God still dares us to look up at the sky, try to count the stars, and fail

absolutely miserably every time, as if we are human beings, after all. God dares us to imagine just how massive not only the universe is, but just how mind-boggling huge the Kingdom of God is, encompassing children of God of all ages, including the ones we don't think are so perfect, to say the least. But God doesn't stop there. God dares us to consider that the Kingdom is not waiting for us somewhere, even beyond the distant sky. God dares us to believe, to accept, that the Kingdom is right here in front of us, including in a bunch junior-highers who proved us so-called experts of youth ministry wrong. But, again, the Kingdom even encompasses the ones who make us roll our eyes. God dares us to realize we do not get to limit where grace abounds even more than all the stars combined.

Time and time again, the Gospel dares us to look back at our own life, take into account all the frustrations and anger and wonderings of our own worth in this world; the Gospel dares us to believe as if the cross and the empty tomb, as if God even had us in mind there, too. And for that Greatest News that can never be taken away from any of us, we give thanks to God indeed! Amen.