



I have always been captivated with the interaction between Abram and God in this passage from Genesis we heard this morning, especially that line: “[God] brought [Abram] outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’” Almost as if God is daring Abram to try to stand there all night and measure the endless vastness of the entire universe, as if God is almost egging Abram on to try to understand the sacred depths of the almighty Lord. It’s not just about helping Abram understand the immense size of his family over the

generations to come. The stars have a way of helping all of us be blown away by the peace and wonder and utter magnificence of God and even this very world with its fair share of brokenness, yes, but it remains the very world that God still loves.

Now, outside our own homes or anywhere in our surrounding communities, these are not always the best places to see the stars for ourselves. There’s too much else going on on the ground around us with other houses and stores and streets and highways with electric lighting that has a way of drowning out our ability to see the incredible sky above. Instead, oftentimes the best places in this country to see more clearly the magnificence above is in our national parks, with over 60 of them spread throughout the land. Millions of people travel from all over the world to see places like Yosemite or Yellowstone or the Grand Canyon or the Rocky Mountains. Now, one that may not be so high on that list to see is the Badlands in the western portion of South Dakota.

While Yellowstone may have Old Faithful and the Grand Canyon is considered one of the few places in the world that never disappoints no matter how much it is talked up before your first visit there, the Badlands seem to be just a bunch jagged rocks clumped on one other, creating some peaks and valleys amidst surrounding prairies for bison and other animals. However, it is referred to as the Land of Stone and Light, because amidst the over 240,000 acres of one of the world’s richest fossil beds, there is this perfect opportunity to catch a glimpse of what God was daring Abram to do thousands of years ago. With not much around the Badlands, there aren’t many other places in this nation in which you can see the sky as clearly as with this national park. One of the vistas to see so many stars that you cannot possibly count, and be blown away by the magnificence of God and this very world with its fair share of rugged brokenness that God still adores.

However, when Sarah and I made the trip out there a few years ago for a family wedding, we also ventured further west in South Dakota to the Black Hills, where you will find millions of acres of forests and mountains. And as much as I remember the never-ending Badlands and the majesty of the nearby Black Hills, there was also another moment in our travels that has stuck with me. We were driving along this road, in this place we have never been, and as much as we do our best to plan out every stop we make, sometimes there are some unexpected, but rather impressive sights that pop up along the way. There were these tall waterfalls off to the left, and so I quickly turned into this narrow parking area, and unfortunately, I did so in front of a few bikers, perhaps a little too close for comfort.

They were all wearing these big leather jackets and colorful bandanas on their heads. They pulled into spots rather close to our rental vehicle. Immediately, I was slightly worried, to say the least, that I was about to get more than an earful from them. I’m sure plenty of people around the area were not always thrilled with us tourists taking over their hometowns, no matter how much we may have helped their local economy. But as they were walking towards us, this woman, instead, responded with shocking kindness and warm hospitality, asking us how our trip was going, and if she could help

us find where we would be going next. It's as if the light of love and compassion and joy was not reserved for the skies over breathtaking landscapes, but evidently, in people wearing leather jackets and colorful bandanas on monstrous motorcycles.

And so, I wonder about this Genesis passage, if God not only dares us to count the stars at night, but that God dares us to measure the brightness of grace being unleashed on the ground level as well. I wonder if God dares us to believe that no matter how much rugged brokenness emerges on this earth and in our very lives, that there is still a world worth loving, loving with the same passionate fervor as our Lord did on the cross and out of the tomb. I wonder if God not only encourages us to look up at the magnificence of the night sky, but the majesty of the earth below: in the Creation and even in humanity, too. It may just be that there is as much breath-taking light of Jesus Christ within our midst as there is in the heavens above. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!

*Image: from OnlyInYourState.com*