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If you happen to go outside on a clear evening and look up, what might you see? Maybe you notice a few clouds hovering in the sky with the sun reflecting beautiful colors off them, or you see the leaves on the trees, knowing they will soon begin falling. If you look toward the northeast sky, you might see the constellation Cassiopeia, an M or W shaped pattern of stars, and near it, the Andromeda Galaxy, also known as M31. This galaxy is estimated to have one trillion stars, though I'm not sure how anyone could ever count that many.

Maybe we could try and count the number of stars in our own Milky Way Galaxy, which has about half as many stars as the Andromeda Galaxy, but even that seems like a task too great to do. How about counting the number of stars visible to the human eye, which is about 5000, though only half of those we could see from our hemisphere. That sounds more manageable.

Abraham had no idea of these statistics thousands of years ago when God invited him to look up into the sky and imagine the number of stars above, which would have contained more visible stars than we see today since he did not have

to deal with the problems of light pollution. When I was a child I could look into the nighttime sky and see the Milky Way stretching across the heavens, but over the past decades, additional lights have wiped out that visible view of the milky path across the sky for many of us.

But Abraham would have had an amazing view of the heavens, and while looking at this vista of beauty, God offered a promise. "Look at the sky and see if you can count the stars. That's how many descendants you will have." That was probably hard to believe, for Abraham and his wife Sarah had lived many years, but they had no children. Abraham reminded God, "you have given me everything I could ask for, except children."

Having descendants without having even one child would seem as impossible as counting all the stars in the sky, and yet, God made this surprising promise, though Abraham and Sarah were not so sure. In the next chapter of the story, they come up with a plan, just to help God's idea move along a bit faster. Abraham has a child with their servant, Hagar, whom they name Ishmael.

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Years later, when Abraham was 99 and Sarah was 90 years old, God reminded Abraham of this promise of numerous descendants, and eventually, after waiting what must have seemed a long time, Sarah had a child, Isaac.

From Isaac came numerous descendants, whom Christians and Jews claim as their lineage. Muslims trace their lineage through Ishmael, Abraham's son as well. After Sarah died, Abraham had more children with Keturah, and Bahá'ís trace their heritage through them.

When God offered the promise of many descendants, I'm sure Abraham never imaged that four faith traditions would claim him as their forefather today: 2.4 billion Christians, 1.9 billion Muslims, 14.7 million Jews, and 6 million Bahá'ís.¹ Isn't that an amazing promise? To a childless couple, God made a promise that they would have as many descendants as the number of stars, and from them billions of faithful people trace their religious heritage!

What insights from God might you hear if you looked up into the sky tonight and observed all the stars? Oftentimes in our busy lives, we may not take

the time to look up into the evening sky, but last night when I look up, I gazed upon the beautiful sliver of the crescent moon, hanging low in the sky. It hung there gracefully, an elegant slice of light.

Whether you stop and look up during the normal routines of your life, or you plan an intentional time to get away to a secluded spot to gaze at the heavens, such as during a camping trip, that pause may help open your heart to the stirring of God within you.

Getting away for a few moments, an hour, or a weekend can open a space for you to reflect on God's movement in your life.

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson went on a camping trip. As they lay down for the night, Holmes said, "Watson, look up into the sky and tell me what you see."

Watson looked up and said, "I see millions and millions of stars."

Holmes asked, "And what does that tell you?"

Watson thoughtfully answered, "Astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Theologically, it tells me that God is great and that we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, it tells me that we will have a

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beautiful day tomorrow. What does it tell you, Holmes?”

Holmes deduced, “Someone stole our tent!”²

When we pause, whether looking into the nighttime sky, smelling the fragrance of a flower, gazing at a piece of artwork, tasting the food we place into our mouths, or feeling the water splash as we wash the dishes, God moves around us, striving to inspire us with a vision of hope in the midst of all our struggles. Sometimes we have to remind ourselves to look around and notice God’s promises that surround us.

In a world filled with anxiety, depression, unemployment, pandemics, natural disasters, and fear, we might find astronomer Leslie Peltier’s (PELT-e-a) suggestion helpful:

Were I to write out one prescription designed to help alleviate at least some of the self-made miseries of [humanity], it would read like this: One gentle dose of starlight to be taken each clear night just before [bedtime].³

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_religious_populations and www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/bahai/ataglance/glance.shtml#

Instead of focusing on what’s *not* going well with the world or your life, celebrate what *is* going well and the wonders of the universe. At first all Abraham and Sarah could do was focus on the fact that they were childless, but while looking into the night sky, they caught a bigger vision, a sense of hope.

As the band OneRepublic so well expressed in their song “Counting Stars”

Lately, I been, I been losin' sleep
Dreamin' about the things that we could be
But baby, I been, I been prayin' hard
Said, no more countin' dollars, we'll be countin' stars
Yeah, we'll be countin' stars.⁴

Rather than counting dollars, losing sleep, or worrying about the things we cannot control, try counting the stars and trusting in God’s promise to be with us always, even when the situation looks impossible.

² Hodgin, Michael. *1002 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers*. Zondervan. Kindle Edition. #158.

³ James Mullaney, *Celebrating the Universe: The Spirituality of Science and Stargazing*, 2013, 213.

⁴ www.youtube.com/watch?v=hT_nvWrelhg