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How many of you have ever gone outside at night and looked up at the night sky, fascinated by all the stars? Staci will tell you that I am crazy enough to go out on cold nights in the middle of the winter with my telescope to find star clusters and comets. Ever since I was a young child, I have been fascinated with outer space, and when someone would ask me when I was young, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" I would have replied, "I want to be an astronaut." When other boys were naming baseball players and makes of cars, I was reciting the speed of light and the names of the Apollo astronauts. Back then I was a bit of a geek, and even today I still have some geeky traits, especially when it comes to astronomy.

I'm not the only one to look up into the night sky at the stars, for in today's scripture we hear the story of Abraham looking up into the evening heavens some 4000 years ago, wondering what God had in mind for him and his wife, Sarah. They had left their home, heading to an unfamiliar land, trusting that God would guide them, for God had promised them a new land and many children. But

as the years went by and the couple remained childless, Abraham was worried that God might have forgotten the promise.

So there Abraham stands one evening under the night sky, worrying about many things, frustrated, possibly having a hard time sleeping. Not only about the lack of children, but Abraham recalled how he had been worried that others in the desert might desire his beautiful wife, so to protect himself he pretended she was his sister until others discovered his deception.

Abraham also worried about his nephew, for he and his family had been traveling with Abraham's family, but they had a disagreement and his nephew departed and went another way. Abraham then learned that his nephew had been captured by others wandering in the desert, and in response Abraham had devised and implemented a dangerous rescue plan. Now Abraham and his family could be in danger.

Ever spent a night worrying about the things that have gone wrong and all those things that might go wrong? Tossing. Turning. Wandering a

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dark house. We've all had those nights at one time or another.

In the midst of the worry, God whispered in Abraham's ear, "Don't be afraid, Abraham. I am your protector," or as the Hebrew literally says, "I am your *magen*—meaning your *shield*. Your reward will be very great."

Abraham protested, "But how is this possible? I don't have any children, so someone else will inherit all my stuff, for you haven't given me any children yet."

Then God invited Abraham to look up into the evening sky and count the stars. "This is how many children you will have."

Have you ever tried to count the stars? How far do you get until you lose track? How many stars do you think you can see on a clear night? ...

If you could travel around the entire globe, you could see about 9000 stars on a clear night. But if you remain just in our hemisphere, you could see about half that many, which is how many? (Here's our Sunday morning math problem...4500.) If you take into account the stars that we can see with

telescopes and those we cannot see, astronomers estimate there are one billion trillion stars!

God was not implying a literal 4500 children or a billion trillion, but a multitude of descendants who would come after him, which includes you and me. Today 2039 million Christians, 1570 million Muslims, 14.5 million Jews, and 7.4 million Baha'i all trace their lineage back to Abraham, our ancestor of faith—not to mention all those who came before us and those who will live after us!

Even though Abraham trusted God, his faith and trust in God was probably stretched when God suggested such a huge number of descendants, especially when Abraham was childless. When we face the difficult realities of life, sometimes our faith becomes strained, as was the case with Presbyterian minister Daniel Hans.

In 1986 he and his wife Beth lost their three-year-old daughter Laura to cancer. Daniel and Beth watched in agony as their little girl faced nine hospitalizations and four separate operations in the last nine months of her life. Their hearts broke as they watched Laura die,

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and they struggled to make sense of what had happened.

In 1987 Daniel Hans released a book containing some of the sermons he preached throughout his daughter's battle with cancer and in the period immediately after her death. One of them is titled: "Caution. Your God is Too Big." Hans relates how he once surveyed his congregation, asking them about their disappointments with God. He asked them to share things they had hoped God would do but that God didn't. People described times they had prayed for the life of a newborn child only to see it die, of the hope God would protect them from violence only to hear of an elderly woman being stabbed on her way to church, prayed for rain for famine stricken Africa only to see starvation continue. To these disappointments Hans now added his own - he had hoped God would heal his baby girl, but her condition only grew worse.

Hans suggests that disappointments like these are the stuff of life, and that if we read the Scriptures we discover that alongside the stories

of miracles and amazing feats by God we hear story after story of disappointment with God, of times God appears silent and inactive. He suggests that sometimes we remember only the miracle stories and so we develop too big a view of God - not that we can have too big a view of God's greatness and power or too big a view of God's love and grace, but that we can have too big a view of God's will. God's action in our world is not always to perform the miraculous, but more often than not to walk through our suffering with us. Hans suggests that "A view of God that is too big is harmful both to believer and unbeliever. When our understanding of God is exaggerated, we declare that God will do things God does not intend to do, at least not regularly and in all situations."¹

Our stewardship campaign last week emphasized **joy** in giving, and this week we emphasize that our **faith** helps us trust that God can use our generosity to do amazing things even when life looks uncertain. We may find ourselves worrying at times, just as Hans worried about his

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daughter and Abraham felt about the future of his family. We may even feel uncertain about the future of our church family, but God's Spirit continues to move in this place, day after day, week after week, year after year. Even when we get discouraged, God never gives up on us. The gifts of our time and resources do make a difference in our uncertain world.

Sometimes we may not always understand how faith works. We may feel like Abraham looking up into the night sky trying to count the stars and wondering if God will keep a promise made to us. And yet, even when we are uncertain, God remains with us, helping us see new possibilities, as was the case with

a nun who works for a local home health care agency was out making her rounds when she ran out of gas. As luck would have it there was a station just down the street. She walked to the station to borrow a can with enough gas to start the car and drive to the station for a fill up.

The attendant regretfully told her that the only can he owned had just been loaned out, but if she would care to wait he was sure it would be back shortly.

Since the nun was on the way to see a patient she decided not to wait and walked back to her car. After looking through her car for something to carry to the station to fill with gas, she spotted a bedpan she was taking to the patient. Always resourceful, she carried it to the station, filled it with gasoline, and carried it back to her car.

As she was pouring the gas into the tank of her car two men walked by. One of them turned to the other and said: "Now that is what I call faith!"²

Tonight, look up into the evening sky, try counting the stars, and know that God has more possibilities and hope for you and our congregation than the number of stars in the sky—and that is what I call faith.

¹ "You God Is Too Big,"

<http://storiesforpreaching.com/category/sermonillustrations/faith/>

² http://jokes.christiansunite.com/Faith/Out_Of_Gas.shtml