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When I lived in Seattle, I knew a man named Roger. He was a retired astro-physicist from the University of Washington, and was about 75 years old. One night, at a congregational retreat in rural Washington, some of us, including Roger, were taking a walk under a gorgeous, star-studded night sky. Roger stopped in his tracks, looked up, rubbed his chin as all great-thinkers seem to do, and softly said, “I don’t spend enough time in the universe anymore.” Over time, Roger had become buried under the stuff of life—the stress of teaching, the demands of administration, ever-changing curricula, the pressure to publish, the demands of students and advisees. He had stopped looking up, and started looking down, at his feet, and at the ground as he walked here and there, day in and day out.

Roger had fallen in love with the universe, and that is why he devoted his life to teaching others about its mysteries and wonders. But somewhere

along the line, as happens to all of us, he began to lose sight of the big picture, because he got distracted by all the small pictures of life...

The very same thing is happening to Abraham in our first reading.

Abraham is reassured by God that he would be a father and his wife Sarah would be a mother, even in their old age. But Abraham is beginning to falter.

He's beginning to have serious doubts about God's promise. After all, it has been 14 years since God first promised Abraham that he would have a son!

14 years! And Sarah and Abraham were old *then*, now they're 14 years older! And still they wait. And fret. And wonder. And doubt. They have dropped their gaze from looking up at God to looking down at themselves.

Hope is dwindling. They are losing sight of the big picture.

And so today God reminds them of the big picture. *Look up*, God says, *look at the heavens and look at the stars. Look out at the expanse of this universe that I call home...count the stars, can you? You will have as*

*many descendants as there are stars in the sky. I promised you that you would have a son. Do you think because some years have passed that I have forgotten you or changed my mind?*

It's a good thing to look up, from time to time, to look out into the big, expansive sky, to spend some time in the universe, to remember the big picture. If we don't do this from time to time, we get sucked into our own little lives and forget that there is a great big universe out there, expanding and contracting, with new, dazzling baby stars being born, with old, worn-out stars dying with a wimper....

God's advice to Abraham is spot on. *Look at the stars, Abraham. Look up. Look at all I've done. If I can come up with Saturn's rings and Jupiter's moons, then I can probably give you a child.*

My kids know a lot about constellations, thanks to their father. They are better at pointing out pictures in the stars than I am. Nevertheless, I have

always been fascinated by the fact that the ancient Greeks and the ancient Sumerians before them made these pictures in the sky that evolved into the Zodiac as we know it. They believed these constellations were the gods' way of telling us stories. How beautiful is *THAT*? That, in order for us to learn a story from the gods, people had to look up at the pictures in the sky, to see what the gods had to say to them...

...and eventually, of course, the stars were used by the earliest of sailors and sea-farers, who used the stars and constellations to help them navigate through unknown waters. Long before the invention of the compass and even longer before GPS, there were stars...and as long as sailors could see the North Star or the Southern Cross, they knew where they were...and they counted on the stars to navigate them through unknown waters...

...and this is exactly what God is saying to Abraham today. *Look at the stars....look at the patterns, marvel at the pictures....if I am faithful to*

*the heavens, I will be faithful to you...if I can show my glory in the stars, I can show my glory in you...Look at the stars, Abraham, and take a deep breath...Remember the big picture, my big promise, I will not fail you.*

God gives us similar assurance, as well. Because it gives God pleasure to give us big things like his kingdom, but it does not give God pleasure to see us freak out and lose hope about the little things in life. God's word helps us navigate through scary, unknown waters, just like the stars helped those early sailors.

But we are by nature small-picture people. If God doesn't act immediately, we assume he has forgotten us or changed his mind. We are a people who need reassurance. We lose sight of the big picture in human relationships, because we get distracted by our own pride and insecurities. We lose sight of the big picture of our relationship to God, because we get distracted by our impatience and despair.

God is patient. We are not.

I am not even patient enough to wait for a slice of pizza to cool off, so I'm always burning the roof of my mouth. If I can't wait for a slice of pizza to cool off, how am I supposed to wait to see big things unfold, like the universe, like God's promises? By learning to set fear aside...Jesus tells us in the Gospel to "not be afraid," and he calls us his little flock but the Greek word is actually "flocklet" which I love because it sounds like a tiny, tiny thing, a little group of confused sheep on a great big planet, spinning around in an even bigger universe.

Do not be afraid. Look up, look at the stars, see the pictures that tell the story of God's creation...take a look at the big picture, little flocklet, and be assured that God will navigate you through any unknown waters you might find yourselves in. It's good wisdom that God gives to Abraham, and to us...to realize that our impatience and fear and frustration might be the

small picture right now, but there are a lot of great big, wonderful things  
going on right over your head. Just look up and see.