

15 After these events, the Lord's word came to Abram in a vision, "Don't be afraid, Abram. I am your protector. Your reward will be very great."

2 But Abram said, "Lord God, what can you possibly give me, since I still have no children? The head of my household is Eliezer, a man from Damascus." 3 He continued, "Since you haven't given me any children, the head of my household will be my heir."

4 The Lord's word came immediately to him, "This man will not be your heir. Your heir will definitely be your very own biological child." 5 Then he brought Abram outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars if you think you can count them." He continued, "This is how many children you will have." 6 Abram trusted the Lord, and the Lord recognized Abram's high moral character. **-Common English Bible**

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You are an heir of God's promise. If you have been baptized, you have a sign and seal of assurance about that... but even if you haven't... I take from our reading last week that all human beings are God's special and beloved creatures for whom God has special plans and purpose. I also take from last week's reading that all human beings are prone to choose death rather than life and to fall short of God's special plans and purposes for them. The thing is... despite our superabundant shortcomings, God doesn't give up on us. God doesn't disown us. The story of salvation history is that God keeps coming to us in myriad ways to reconnect us to Godself— through law, through prophets, and then in person— the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ who came promising life in all its fullness. Jesus Christ who revealed life even beyond death. We are God's heirs— the heirs of God, the source and owner of everything.

But it sure doesn't feel like this all the time. Sometimes it seems the stars align and everything is possible for us. But other times we survey our circumstances and we think we've come to the end of the road— the possibilities are scant and unappealing. Dead end. No turning back. Or we feel boxed in, trapped in a dank and dark container with just enough sustenance to keep our hearts beating.

I heard a story about refugees on the island of Lesbos this week. Their camp recently burned to the ground further displacing 26,000 already displaced people. It burned because of fires set in rage by refugees cracking under months or years of unchanging, deplorable circumstances and the added pressures of COVID. Many are preferring sleeping on the streets to sleeping in the camp. They want out. Even young people are ceasing to believe that that is possible. But we don't have to look so far from

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home to see people who feel boxed in, trapped, stuck, desperate. We who had adapted to take comfort in walks in our neighborhoods or socially distant outdoor socialization have been confined to our homes due to toxic air. Many of us have loved ones who have lost everything and others of us are watching in horror as fire ravages our state. And still the virus rages. And still there is great social unrest. Some of us, at least sometimes, are angry at God. Some of us, at least sometimes, are struggling to hope for better days. Some of us feel that we as a nation, a planet, are at a dead end, no turning back, trapped.

Abraham, then Abram, heard God speak a promise to him when he was already quite mature... a promise of offspring and land... offspring as numerous as the dust of the earth. It was an improbable promise, but it was enough to encourage him to take his wife Sarah, then Sarai, and all his household on a long journey. Right about at the stage when folks like to be settling down, Abram packed up for an uncertain future— trusting in the promise of God. But... years passed... no kids, no land. Eventually, he arrived in the promised land, but he had no one to pass it on to. God renewed the promise to Abram and it kept him chugging along. More time passed... still no kids. And now Abram is really old. And God comes again saying “Don’t be afraid. I am your protector” or maybe it is actually “benefactor” both are possibilities in the Hebrew- “Your reward will be very great.”

Could you hear Abraham scoff at this? I think maybe there was a snort. “Give me a break God— time’s up. There’s nothing more you can do. Game over.” He had a plan for letting his servant inherit his accumulated wealth, the land finally in his possession because he had no child to whom to leave it. He took a cold, hard look at his circumstances and the possibilities were reduced to one— to die childless and let his wealth, and the promised land, leave his family.

But God had promised numerous descendants to come from him, countless descendants— God’s promise of land is useless without generations to pass it through. God promised.

But Abram had lost faith in that promise.

So God promised again. God knew Abram believed himself to be at the end of the road, to be in a box of scant possibility— so God pulled Abram outside and made him

look at the sky. “Do you see the stars, Abram? Can you count them? So will your descendants be— that unfathomably numerous, that breathtakingly bright and diverse.”

And Abram believed once more. And that was all God needed to know that Abram was an upstanding character... God just needed Abraham's trust.

The Book of Hebrews suggests that “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Jim Wallis once said that “Hope is believing in spite of the evidence and then watching the evidence change.” Sometimes when we feel up against a wall, or boxed in and cut off... we need to turn around, step out into the wide open and look up.... To realize how vast the universe is, how infinite the possibilities are, and to remember that we belong to a promise making and a promise keeping God who has done amazing things in the past, is doing amazing things today, and will do amazing things in the future— things our circumstances at this moment would not suggest are possible. This is the God we worship. This is the God we serve.

It all may seem quite unlikely. We may look at our lives and call ourselves most unlikely heirs... But Abraham is the father of three world religions... We are Abraham's stars... So what is God promising you? What big dream have you not been daring to dream because it seems too big, too improbable... like conception over the age of 90, perhaps? I'd like you to take some time right now to think about that— to contemplate your dreams, or the call or calls God has placed on your heart, and to write that on your star, or on any piece of paper... and I'd like you to find a spot in your home for your star or written dream, put it somewhere where you can see it often— that it might inspire belief in spite of the evidence, conviction in things yet unseen.

I learned about the refugee situation in Greece from the New York Times podcast, *the Daily*, September 17, “The Forgotten Refugee Crisis in Europe,” <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/17/podcasts/the-daily/moria-fire-asylum-seekers.html>