

“Daring to Believe”
Genesis 15:1-6

Ben Johnston-Krase
February 24, 2013

¹After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.”

²But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?”³ And Abram said, “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.”

⁴But the word of the LORD came to him, “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.”⁵ He brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.”

⁶And Abram believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

“Little Nutbrown Hare was going to bed. He held on tight to Big Nutbrown Hare’s very long ears. He wanted to be sure that Big Nutbrown Hare was listening.” So begins the children’s book, *Guess How Much I Love You* by Sam McBratney.

It’s one that all three of our girls have loved for a time. “Guess how much I love you,” says little Nutbrown Hare to the older rabbit.

“I don’t think I could guess that,” says Big Nutbrown Hare.

“This much,” says Little Nutbrown Hare stretching out his arms as wide as he could go.

Big Nutbrown Hare has even longer arms. “But I love you this much,” he says.

“Hmmm. That’s a lot,” thinks Little Nutbrown Hare. “I love you as high as I can reach,”

“I love you as high as I can reach,” says Big Nutbrown Hare.

Little Nutbrown Hare keeps trying to come up with something that Big Nutbrown Hare can’t top. “I love you all the way to my toes... I love you as high as I can hop... I love all the way down the lane as far as the river...” But each time, Big Nutbrown Hare shows that he can love Little Nutbrown Hare even more. So then finally the little rabbit pulls out all the stops. “I love you right up to the moon!”

This final thought exhausts Little Nutbrown Hare and he falls asleep in his bed. At which point, Big Nutbrown Hare snuggles in for the night and whispers, “I love you right up to the moon—and back.”

The book continues in our family conversations. Tucking in at night or in the car on the way to school, “Dad, I love you more than all the snowflakes.”

“Well, I love *you* more than all the snowflakes *and* raindrops.”

“Mom, I love you more than all the candy canes.”

“Well, I love you more than all the *stripes* on all the candy canes.” It goes back and forth, back and forth, usually until someone says something like, “more than all the stars in the sky.” At this point, my girls don’t have a good comeback to “all the stars in the sky.” I think they know that it’s a big number. Should they attempt a challenge, however, I’m ready for them.

NASA scientists and astronomers have been, over the years, attempting to count the number of stars in the sky. It’s a daunting task, but one that has provided some clarity to the age-old question, “Which are there more of: grains of sand on earth or stars in the sky?”

Let’s start with the sand. Assume that one grain of sand has an average size, calculate how many grains make a teaspoon, and then multiply that teaspoon through all of the beaches and deserts in the entire world. You come up with, roughly, 7 quintillion, 500 quadrillion grains of sand. That’s a lot of sand.

Obviously, if you look up at night, you can’t see that many stars. On a clear, dark night, you can maybe get to a few thousand. But let’s say you just happen to have a calculator and a Hubble telescope handy, so now you can count distant galaxies, faint stars, red dwarfs... everything in the sky that we’ve ever recorded. Suddenly your star count shoots up to 70 thousand million, million, million stars, give or take a few. This means that there are *multiple* stars in the sky for *each and every* grain of sand on the planet. [1]

This is the kind of knowledge Dads need if they’re going to engage their children in a game of “I love you more...” and I am ready to use it when the time comes. It’s also the kind of knowledge that makes us wonder what God was up to in that conversation with Abram in Genesis—the one where Abram’s having trouble believing it all—trouble believing that God will be faithful, trouble understanding how God’s promises can possibly come true. And so God says to Abram, “Come outside. Look up toward the heavens and count the stars, *if you are able to count them.*”

I picture Abram standing out in some field in the dark, “1, 2, 3, 4, 5... 78, 79, 80, 81, 82...” Finally God says, “You can stop now, Abram. You can’t count them all. *So shall it be with your descendants.*”

This is news to Abram, who at this point in the story is 80-some years old. His wife, Sarai, is right up there with him. They’ve both come to the logical conclusion that they’re not going to have children at this point in their lives. In fact, when God tells them otherwise, all they can do is laugh themselves silly at the thought of it.

But like other episodes in the book of Genesis, this is no ordinary story. It is, rather, the legend of a people whose identity is wrapped up in the drama of God’s extravagant love. And in that context, anything is possible. And so God leads Abram out under the stars and says, “More than all the stars in the sky—so shall your children and your children’s children be.”

And the most daring part of this legend comes next. *Abram believed.*

Usually when we think of “daring,” I don’t know—I suppose certain images come to mind. George Washington crossing the Delaware River, Custer’s Last Stand, D-day and the Normandy Invasion. Of course, these days you can find all kinds of people doing daring things online: swimming with great white sharks, climbing Yosemite’s Half Dome with no ropes and no climbing equipment, jumping out of a plane with no parachute.

The internet may have been invented with improved communication and research technology in mind, but it’s become, among other things, a channel through which human beings can showcase themselves pushing the envelope further and further—daring to do the unimaginable.

And yet I believe that there are far more daring things to be done in this world than base jump off of a skyscraper or walk on a tightrope over Niagara Falls. The stars of YouTube who challenge gravity and even their own mortality with each progressively more death-defying stunt—they’re still not as daring as some of the people we know and have known.

The mother of two children who was just told she has leukemia and maybe less than a year to live. But she gets up in the morning and makes breakfast, brushes hair, packs lunches, and sends her kids off to school. *That’s daring.*

The husband who sits with his wife of fifty years—a woman who doesn’t know him anymore and hasn’t for some time, not since Alzheimer’s took hold of her mind. But he’s there, with her, feeding, caring, bathing, changing, chatting, and for how many more years? *That’s daring.*

The victim of abuse who loves again. *That’s daring.*

The soldier come home who reaches out for help with post-traumatic stress. *That’s daring.*

Or how about you? And me? How about all of us here—we who come to be church together in this place, despite everything happening in this world that would suggest that things are spinning out of control... Violence, chaos, confusion, political division, climate change, racism, sexism, homophobia, hypocrisy in the church and in the culture, economy uncertain, massive problems spinning wildly out of control like poverty and abuse and hunger, things falling apart, lives falling apart... The world can be a horrifically challenging place to be in if we’re paying attention and yet we gather here week after week *to pay attention and to believe, in a world spinning wildly out of control, that there is a God who loves us extravagantly—to believe that we are held in the palm of God’s hand—and to believe that this God has future in mind for us, a future of hope and peace. THAT IS DARING.*

The house that Karla and I bought here in Racine was built in 1930. It’s a wonderful little brick bungalow and it suits us just fine. We’ve lived there for four and a half years now, and I think that being in an 80-year-old home has provided us with some insights into what life was like decades before we were born. For example, we’ve concluded that back in 1930 people *really liked to shovel snow*, because our driveway stretches from the curb *all the way back around the house* to the garage, which is situated as far from the street as possible.

We've also concluded that the people who built garages back in the 30's did not drive Toyota Sienna mini-vans, nor did they expect that something called a mini-van would ever come on the scene. Thus parking our 2006 Toyota Sienna in our 1930 bungalow garage is always an adventure. You'd think that after four and a half years, we'd have it down by now. But with about three inches to spare on either side of our rear-view mirrors, we don't. Each and every time we creep our van into that garage, we think to ourselves, "I hope I can do it. I hope I can do it."

That's what daring to believe can be like too. We gather as a church in worship, squeezing it all in here with us—our doubts, our fears, nagging anxieties, unanswered prayers, suspicions that maybe the world really is falling apart, or that maybe we really are on our own...

We park ourselves in this sanctuary of hope in the Good News of God's grace and love, and openly face, week after week, the daring prospect of *belief*. "I hope I can do it. I hope I can do it."

Have you heard of "The Whisper Test"? It's the title of a book written by Mary Ann Bird, and in it she shares her life story in all its power and wonder.

Mary Ann Bird was born with multiple birth defects: deaf in one ear, a cleft palate, a disfigured face, a crooked nose, lopsided feet...

During her childhood, Mary Ann suffered through these physical impairments, of course, but she also endured the emotional damage inflicted by other children. "Mary Ann," her classmates would taunt, "what happened to your lip?"

"I cut it on a piece of glass," she would lie to them.

Every year at school, Mary Ann and her classmates took "the whisper test." This was the annual hearing check, which back then was conducted by the teacher. She would call each child in the class to her desk, and the child would cover first one ear, and then the other. The teacher would then whisper something to the child like, "The sky is blue" or "You have new shoes."

The whisper test. If the child could hear and repeat the sentence, he or she passed the test. Little Mary Ann was terrified, of course, that she would fail, and so to avoid the humiliation of it all, she would cheat on the whisper test, secretly cupping her hand over her one good ear so that she could still hear what the teacher was saying.

Well one year, Mary Ann was in Miss Leonard's class. Miss Leonard—one of the most beloved teachers in the school. Every child, including Mary Ann, wanted so badly to be noticed by Miss Leonard, loved by her, wanted to be her pet. Then came the day of the dreaded hearing test. When her turn came, Mary Ann was called up to Miss Leonard's desk. And as she cupped her hand over her good ear, Miss Leonard leaned forward to whisper. "I waited for those words," Mary Ann writes, "which God must have put into her mouth, those seven words which changed my life."

Miss Leonard did not say, “The sky is blue” or “You have new shoes.” What she whispered was, “*I wish you were my little girl.*” And from that moment on, Mary Ann *dared to believe* that she was a person of inner beauty and worth. [2]

Isn't that why we're here? We might *say* that we're here because we like the music or the teaching or the people are friendly... lots of good, compelling reasons to be here, friends, but aren't we *really* here so that we can cup our hands over our ears and listen for the whispering truth of God, in spite of our brokenness and in spite of the world's brokenness, in spite of all that is falling apart and all that appears hopeless, aren't we here to listen for the whispering truth of God, that truth that is whispered into every beautiful human ear: “You are my beloved child, in whom I delight”

And aren't we here to *dare to believe* that it's true?

1. From Robert Krulwich's NPR blog piece, “Which is Greater, The Number of Sand Grains on Earth or Stars in the Sky?” September 17, 2012
2. From Thomas G. Long's *Testimony, Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004, p. 86, though I owe this sermon illustration to Mark Ramsey, who used it in his sermon, “Vocabulary Lessons” on February 17, 2013 at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church in Asheville, NC.