

## **"God of the Aliens, God of the Stars"**

Isaiah 40:21-22, 25-39

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*Do you not know?*

*Have you not heard?*

*Has it not been told you from the beginning?*

*Have you not understood since the earth was founded?*

*He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth,  
and its people are like grasshoppers.*

*He stretches out the heavens like a canopy,  
and spreads them out like a tent to live in.*

*"To whom will you compare me?*

*Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One.*

*Lift your eyes and look to the heavens:*

*Who created all these?*

*He who brings out the starry host one by one,  
and calls them each by name.*

*Because of his great power and mighty strength,  
not one of them is missing.*

*Why do you say, O Jacob,*

*and complain, O Israel,*

*"My way is hidden from the LORD;*

*my cause is disregarded by my God"?*

*Do you not know?*

*Have you not heard?*

*The LORD is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth.*

*He will not grow tired or weary,  
and his understanding no one can fathom.*

*He gives strength to the weary*

*and increases the power of the weak.*

Last September George and I had the opportunity to hear Dr. Mario Livio of the Hubble Space Institute give the opening lecture in SMU's Collegium Da Vinci Series. Dr. Livio is a world-renowned astrophysicist. You would think such a lecture might be a real snoozer. But it wasn't. Dr. Livio is an awesome speaker. He is articulate and funny. He has the uncanny ability to be able to explain very esoteric concepts in a way that we normal humans can comprehend. But what was most incredible was seeing the actual images from the Hubble telescope on the huge screen of the auditorium.

I encourage you to get on line and look at images on [hubblesite.org](http://hubblesite.org), to see these gorgeous glimpses of God's universe.

The beauty and uniqueness of each photograph is astonishing. As is the enormity of the scale it captures. Each picture has over 10,000 galaxies within its perimeter. Each of these galaxies is made up of hundreds of billions of stars. And each picture represents just a speck in the night sky. Wow. This is mind boggling.

Gazing into the pictures from the telescope I was reminded again of how small and insignificant we are. *"Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing." (Isaiah 40:26).*

How can you not believe in God when you survey the awesomeness of the universe? How can you not believe that modern science adds to, rather than detracts, from our experience of the divine?

This is the way I feel, but you may not agree. You may be more skeptical. You may have more questions. You may not share Isaiah's notion that God's beautiful creation explains everything we need to know about God. You may not be all that comforted by the idea of a distant, unseen Ruler. Chapter 40 of the book of Isaiah is often called "The Book of Comfort." It was written to comfort Israel, displaced into Babylonian exile. But when you hear "all men are grass, surely the people are grass, the grass withers and the flowers fail"---*this is comfort?* When it says that God will conquer all the princes of this world, *this is reassuring?* Because God hasn't. We are still in the place where evil seems to prevail, where might seems to make right. If you find this disconcerting, if you have a hard time relating to this distant, eternal and unknowable God, you are not alone.

Frederick Buechner writes of our quest for proof of God's existence in his essay, "Message in the Stars." He takes us on an imaginative trip.

*"If God really exists, why in heaven's name does God not prove that he exists instead of leaving us here in our terrible uncertainty? Why does he not show his face so that at last a despairing world can have hope? At one time or another, everyone asks such a question.*

*What would happen if God did set about demonstrating his existence in some dramatic and irrefutable way?*

*Suppose, for instance, that God were to take the great, dim river of the Milky Way as we see it from down here flowing across the night sky and were to brighten it up a little and then rearrange it so that all of a sudden one night the world would step outside and look up at the heavens and see not the usual haphazard scattering of stars but, written out in letters light years tall, the sentence I REALLY EXIST.<sup>1</sup>*

And Buechner goes on to muse that such a fantastic feat would undoubtedly affect almost everyone. For a while, wars would cease, people would change, but maybe after weeks and months of this message in the sky people would get bored and say, "Well, God exists, but so what?" Most people would go back to the way things were before the stars were rearranged.

God exists, but so what? Why doesn't God fix all of this mess? Why does it seem that God has abandoned us? These are the questions that nag nearly all of us, deep down, from time to time and some of us, not so deep down, almost all the time.

About a month ago the stars were aligned just so, so that for first time in six years our whole family was together on my actual birthday. Nowadays this practically takes an act of God. I wanted to savor the moment.

I had wanted to savor the moment, but I was tired. Instead of going out, we had a quiet dinner at home around our table, still dressed in its Christmas finery: gold tablecloth, lit candles, a spray of white roses, Christmas tree lights glittering in the background.

Though I often long for "deep conversations" with my family, they are rare, like a jewel. This year I got such a jewel for my birthday. I don't remember what or who prompted the conversation but somehow I found myself saying,

"Despite our best efforts I am sorry to say I believe there will be a time in the not so distant future when earth and humans are no more. . ."

"What a downer, mom, I can't believe you think that!"

"That makes me not want to have children!" (she said, knowing full well this would get a rise out of her mom).

"Well, I don't think it will be in your lifetime, or even in the lifetime of your children, but I don't think we are going to be able to undo all the damage we have done fast enough."

The youngest son pipes in with, "Well, there probably will be flooding and mass starvation, but some people will survive."

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<sup>1</sup> Secrets in the Dark, A Life in Sermons, by Frederick Buechner, pp. 16-18

“This is reassuring?”

“What about taking off for another planet?”

“Do you think there is intelligent life elsewhere?”

“Definitely! For sure!”

“Ok, then is God the God of aliens, too?”

“What?”

“If there are other creatures God created, is God their God too?”

“I suppose so.”

“What if there isn’t a God after all? What if we’re wrong?”

“What difference does it make if this is all there is?”

Indeed. What difference does it make?

This is a question we all ask ourselves at some time or another. What difference does it all make? Because what we really want, what we long for and so desperately need, is not after all proof of God’s existence but the experience of God’s presence. What we need to know is not just that God is up there, out there, immortal, invisible, but that God is down here, in and among the hum- drum of our days and the ho-hum of our nights.

The experience of God’s presence may be closer than you think. Instead of looking to the stars, we look to ourselves, into the things which bother us and the things which delight us. Into the questions and the doubts, into the disquiet that, after all is said and done, *is there*, no matter how much we try to skate around it, no matter how much we pretend it’s not. A disquiet that tells us of God’s absence, and of our deep longing for God’s presence.

When we encounter the stranger, do we look away or do we take it all in? When there is a mean-spirited joke, do we laugh along with others or do we quietly object? When we have a chance to lie or cheat, do we take it, knowing that in the ways of the world such little crimes and small lies as we can get away with do pay off? Do we take secret delight in someone’s misfortune, or do we walk alongside them in care? Do we take every opportunity to put down our rival, or do we gracefully let go of such pettiness? Do we cling to old hurts and caress them like a favorite object, or we cast them aside?

Do we face each new day with the resolve of doing better, of taking one step forward instead of sliding back? Do we continue to do small things with love, because that is what we *can* do? Do we look for the face of Christ in each person we meet? Do we ask for God’s spirit in every conflict we encounter, turning over to God those things that are too big for us anyway?

These are the deep questions for the deep longings we all have.

My birthday conversation about God's existence went on a while longer until finally the youngest one said, "Can we talk about something lighter, like dessert? Is there any cake?"

Well there wasn't any cake because mom hadn't made any, but we had ice cream cones for my birthday and I blew out a taper and I made a wish.

It wasn't a usual sort of birthday wish. It was a wish for God's presence, for an experience of the Living God, for me and my children and my husband and for all of you, too, for everyone on this planet who seeks to know God and who hungers for God's transforming presence.

And I was grateful for this jewel of a discussion, this little gem I am going to hang on to, for this family God has graced me with, for the bigger family here that I am now a part of, and for the God who really is beyond all that we can ask or think. Immortal, invisible, wise. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of all the world, the stars, the galaxies, the universe, and yes, maybe even, **even maybe** the God of the aliens.