

“ON A STARRY, STARRY NIGHT...”

Text: “What is man that you are mindful of him, or mortals that you care for them? Yet, you have made them a little lower than the angels, and have crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands...” Psalm 8:3-5

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Oh, how I love that ancient Psalmist, out there on a starry night on his Judean hill, three thousand years or so ago. He and I have often paled around together, wondering about the Universe God made. Some say he was King David, could be, gazing at the enchanting heavens into the uncharted endlessness, out there, pondering the moon and the stars and the galaxies, wondering what on earth was going on on earth, feeling small and insignificant in the face that heavenly majesty.

You know the feeling, don't you? I hope so. Although in some ways, I actually hope you don't. Stuck in our city houses and apartment-condo dwelling places, with busy schedules here and there and everywhere, we are lest apt to pause long enough to catch our breath, let alone gaze up at the night sky and capture something of the beauty and antiquity of the universe to which we all belong. Astronomer Carl Sagan, who died too young, once cautioned that, "We go about our daily lives, understanding almost nothing about our universe, giving little thought to the machinery which generates the sunlight that makes life possible, or to the gravity what glues us to an earth that would otherwise hurl us off into space. Few of us spend much time," Sagan concluded, "searching through the heavens to see who we are and what we might accomplish." (Cosmos: A Personal Voyage, Introduction: P. 13)

It reminds me of that well known Peanuts cartoon of Charles Schulz, whose new biography brings it all back wonderfully. Charlie Brown and his nemesis Lucy are standing one night staring up into the heavens. Lucy says, "Charlie Brown, aren't the stars beautiful tonight; their grandeur always speaks to me." Continuing Lucy says, "Look up, I see Orion and Aries and the moon grazing on Pleiades... What do you see Charlie Brown?"

"Well," Charlie finally murmurs, "I was going to say I saw a ducky and a chickie and a cow jumping over the moon, but let's go inside and watch TV. I am beginning to feel insignificant." (page 251)

The Psalmist had few other choices or amusements when it was his shift to keep watch over the flock by night. Shepherds care for the sheep and protect them from the vagaries of the night. He had no portable TV, no battery powered computer, no Blackberry, no music to download, no books to read by the light of the moon. All he had were his shepherd's crook, a sling shot with stones, and a little homemade harp, on watch for the wolves and foxes and bears. Lonely perhaps, afraid, pensive, then one night he jotted down these poetic words which we call Psalm 8. Let's look more closely at our text: "When I consider the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have established, what is man that you are mindful of him, or these mortals, that you care for them?... Yet you have made them a little lower than the angels and have given them dominion over the works of your hands." (Psalm 8:3f)

There are three brief things I want to share with you, and they are easy to remember – I hope. If not they will be in the copy of the sermon.

I.

One, as Satchmo used to sing: we live in a wonderful world, created for us to live in, by the Creator God. You are a child of God, and as my grammar-bending preacher told me when I was still a teen: Always remember that "God don't make no Junk!" You are precious in his sight. You matter. God has a purpose for your life. You arrived punctually on time when the Creator had need of you. The one who made the starry heavens knows you and me by name. So, if you feel down today and have some special worry and care, and you are not sure where it all is going or what to do next, pause with the Psalmist and listen to his opening words: "O Lord, Our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth."

The majesty and glory of the Lord might sound a hollow, all-too-familiar-old-hat kind of Religion 101, unless and until some starry, starry night you see what the Psalmist saw that night. “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness there of; the world and they that dwell therein. For he has founded it upon the seas and has established it upon the floods.” (Psalm 24:1-2) As my old friend, Baptist Carlyle Marney, used to say: “You should always stutter when you stumble into the presence of Almighty God!” And aye, you should.

I would guess that most all of you know of Vincent Van Gogh, the famous post-impressionist Dutch painter who was possessed of great talent, but possessed also of greater demons, which took his life at age 38. One of his most famous paintings is Starry Night. I was looking at a copy of it the day I decided to preach this sermon. Starry Night was completed while he was in the mental asylum at Saint-Remy in France, 13 months before his self-inflicted death. It shows a night sky in furious motion, almost on fire with huge swirling stars and planets: the moon, planet Venus and the constellation Aries (his own birth-sign) are up there. Van Gogh knew the 1880s astronomy from memory. Each heavenly body in the painting is in the exact same position it would have been in the sky outside his Sanitarium. The little village of St. Remy lies peacefully down in the valley. A huge Cypress Tree dominates the left front of the painting from top to bottom, intruding into the sky. But somehow, out of the trouble in Vincent’s mind and in the turmoil of everything else, most Van Gogh watchers agree there is a peace in the valley.

Singer and composer Don McLean was so overwhelmed when he was first saw the painting that he wrote the once popular song called, “Vincent (Starry, Starry Night),” which Josh Groban resurrected a couple of years ago, and has recently been circling the Internet, with paintings to match. The painting, the song, and notably Psalm 8 were the triple inspiration for this sermon. Part of McLean’s song goes:

Starry, Starry night,
Paint your palette blue and grey,
Look out on a summer’s day,
With eyes that know the darkness of my soul.
.....
Now I understand what you tried to say to me,
How you suffered for your sanity,
How you tried to set them free.
They would not listen then,
Perhaps they never will.

When I first came to visit Sharon Church, before I came on board as your Interim, I tried to figure out your stained glass windows. I don’t remember the sermon that day (no offense intended). I was focused on the windows. They took some concentration to get used to but they tell the story of our faith: The Birth and Resurrection surround the Cross of Christ with excellence. But I was frustrated because I could not see the Creation Window now on my right.

This past week, I asked Jane Crutchfield, our office Administrator, to find the original artist’s drawing of the Creation window, which as you can see in our Sanctuary, is partially obliterated by the west corner of the balcony façade. The entire window is reproduced in the small brochure available in the narthex. The artist’s inspiration Creation window was the same verse as our Sermon Text today. The stained glass shows the

darkness of space. Then God said “Let there be light, and light there was!” Then God created the firmament of the heavens and stretched out the moon and the stars and the planets, hanging on in our still-expanding universe.

The Creation window reaches up with awesome, spinning constellations. The Earth itself is not shown, probably to remind us, as the Astronauts say when they view Planet Earth from outer space, that our planet is just a small and finite little round ball in the panoply of the heavens. In Creation “God saw everything that he had made and it was good.” (Genesis 1:25) The earth and all that God made within it, is miraculous, majestic and unfathomable; but when he made it, it was good. What is wrong with it is the responsibility of men and women, time and change, but not the responsibility of God. First, remember that we have a Glorious Creation fashioned for us by God of power and majesty and might.

II.

Then, secondly, focus on the remarkable creation and gift of your own life. It sounds obvious, but it was not obvious to the one who wrote the book of Genesis. Some things have gone wrong, but they were not in the original plan and purpose of God. Two things the author knew for sure: One, God made the world, and two, God made it good. Sin and trouble and evil came with the temptation of Satan, matched against the weakness and disobedience of those who occupied the original Garden. God made it as a place of peace and loveliness. That is what the word Eden means in Hebrew, “a place of everlasting delight” or “a perfect place.” But all of a sudden, when day six is over, the day on which man was made, we read: “God saw everything that he had made, and it was not only ‘good,’ it was very good.” (Say A-men.) The crown of his creation was his human beings, made in the image of the Eternal God.

So we are here. Professor Harlow Shapely, a master astronomer from up north, once wrote that when you consider all that could and has happened since the moment of creation, it is “absolutely impossible” (his words) that a man or a woman could have come into being. It defies all odds that we are here. But we are. If you had been there at the moment of creation and witnessed the huge cosmic explosion which set it all in motion, and someone had told you out on the fringe that one day there would be men and women, boys and girls, who would love and laugh and be loyal to each other, and that they would reach out to those around them who needed food and trust and encouragement and love, you would have laughed out loud and scoffed: “In all this noise and confusion, absolutely no way Jose, no way!” It could not have happened.

I am not attacking or defending whether evolution might have occurred. Nor am I suggesting that there was some Intelligent Design. I trust the Creator of the universe and the men and women who are made in his image. I trust them to find a way to keep it moving forward. And if in the time and providence of God we do not succeed, so be it. It is not within my time and province to worry about how the Universe will end. One day the world will end, no matter what we do; one day it will all go to dark; one day we will know – as even now we are known – but not yet, not that we know of anyway. So Christian, keep on going: be prepared as if this will be your last day on earth, but work like it is the first. “You are like an arrow,” John Wesley once wrote, “shot from the bow of God to fall you know not where.” And my favorite Willie Nelson still sings, “Ain’t it funny how time slips away?”

But now, we left our little Psalmist friend all by himself out on the ancient hillside gazing spellbound at the moon and the stars and the constellations of the heavens. That wasn't very nice. But, watch where his mind goes next: Verse 3-4, with all of this above me, Lord, "When I consider the heavens, the moon and the stars which you have ordained...I have to ask, what is man, that you are mindful of him; and who is woman that you care for her?"

Who is this man, the funny little bi-peded creature who cannot fly with the birds, nor swim with the fish, nor run with the fleet-footed beasts of the earth? Who are these men and women who for a few score of years strut around as if they own the earth and all, only to be soon cut off and fly away? Who is this man? The first one lied and hid from the presence of the Lord; the first woman wheedled it to her own advantage and blamed a snake? The founding father of their nation stole his elder brother's birthright. Their mightiest King enticed the wife of one of his ablest and loyal soldiers to come over to the palace for a visit; then had the soldier killed in battle so that he would never know or tell. Who is this man who betrays his best friend and teacher? And who is this woman who gives the king an extra drink and entices him with the dance of her daughter, and then as a prize, requests the head of saintly John the Baptist?

What kind of odd place is this odd place anyway? What does it profit a man to be faithful all his days?" Koheleth is now speaking in Ecclesiastes. I mean whatever you do, it isn't enough; it all goes round and round, and when you have done it all, you soon fly off and are gone away forever more.

What makes us so special and so superior to the beasts, assuming that we are? Why? What? Because we are made in the image likeness of God: no other reason, no other way to differentiate humans from the kingdom of animals that have ranged across the earth for time out of mind. We often miss that, you and I: The one thing which distinguishes even the lowliest form of human life from the highest form of the animals, is that we own a unique and special spot in the universe simply because God breathed the breath of his life into us – made in his image, after his likeness.

If we ever remove that, if we ever decide that man is just another creature, separated by rank and privilege maybe, but not by the initial and enormous distinction of what happened on the day God gave us our special honor, we are finished. Canon Streeter used to say that the most significant moment in universal history was the one in which that which was "not man," became "man," a living being.

If we ever forget or relegate it to a secondary place and demote Homo sapiens from their central salient height, then we will become like Hitler, where the ones he executed en masse were not real humans. They did not matter, for they were not on the same level ground with his Aryans. Or, we will become again like those who trafficked in human slavery, or like the warring tribes in Africa today, who inflict enormous torture, pain and death on their enemies, even national extinction. They draw the final line right there: the enemies are not bona fide human beings: they are no more than the animals. In the warring tribes of recently troubled Kenya, for example, they refer to members outside their tribe as cockroaches, not human beings. Mankind is special in creation, made in the Imago Dei, the image of God. Male and female, he created them.

That is what makes us careful to treat all men and women and children as equals, endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights. That is the reason we look out for the rights of our enemies, our prisoners, the homeless and the hungry. They are created in the image of God, such as we. They are problems at times; but they are people most of all, loved and honored by the Heavenly Father.

And The Creator promised to remain faithful to his created beings. Our chief glory comes to us because we belong to him, as children of the Almighty Creator. God loves you just as you are, not because you are worth it, but because you are his. You can be yourself with the Lord God of heaven and of earth. You do not have to play games, or pretend, or to hide in the garden, as Adam and Eve did, when God came looking for them. God said, “I know where you are. I know what you think. I know what you do in the darkness which you think nobody else sees. And I love you anyway – you loveable, little dummy.” “Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28)

The Psalmist did not know everything: in fact from our point of view he hardly knew anything about the expanding Universe. He could not have known that Aristotle taught in 350 BC that the Earth was round. Or that in 150 AD, Ptolemy knew that the planets were circling the sun. Copernicus added in 1514, that the fiery Sun, and not the Earth, was the center of our Universe. A little later in the 1560s Galileo would so improve the telescope that he could search the heavens and prove to everyone but his own church that it is not a geocentric universe. The Psalmist could not have known that Isaac Newton would say (it is 1687 already) after the apple fell and hit him on the noggin, that space and time were not constants but were in movement all the time, not quite the relativity of Albert Einstein, but heading out in that direction.

The Psalmist did not know much of the technical things we have discovered in the skies, but he knew what he saw and what it meant. He had not met Einstein or Hubble or Stephen Hawking, God bless him. Misshapen in body by ALS (Lou Gehrig’s disease) he keeps on searching for a unified theory of the universe. Thirty-eight years of that bewildering illness. He writes now by blinking his eyes into a computer, designed at Cambridge just for him. He won’t give up. (If you have not done so, you might want to read [A Brief History of Time](#), or [The Universe in a Nut-shell](#).) I think the Psalmist would have been fascinated by Stephen Hawking. He did not know scientific details of our modern world, but he knew where to turn for the answers.

King David, if he wrote it, could not have known that the Universe is over 14 billion years old, then and now. He would not have believed that the reflected light he was seeing back then had been traveling 176 thousand miles per second for centuries in a Universe which is 24 billion light-years across. The beauty you will see in the heavens tonight, if the way be clear, is still being reflected by the stars the ancient Psalmist was looking at back then. “O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth.”

God loved him and he knew that, in spades. Oh, I guess he had his moments: times when he got down and was nervous and wondered what on earth was going on. Why this happened or that? But he knew that God was in charge of it all, that The Almighty had created the universe and had breathed his breath into the life of man and woman. “He also made them a little lower than the angels, and crowned each of them with glory and honor.” Hey, I like that part. Then he adds, Psalm 8, verse 6: “God, you have given human beings dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things and all creatures under their feet.” Did you hear that word “dominion”? We want to pause a second there before we go on.

III.

That leads us to the final point of our sermon: One, God created the Universe; Two, he created each and all of us in his own Image. And Third, God gave us dominion over all the earth. Dominion, in the Hebrew language in which the Old Testament was written, means to have “supreme authority, and absolute ownership.” It means that God has turned it all over to us, everything, the whole shebang, all of his creation belongs to us. Listen, “Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and

over the cattle, and over all the earth, and even over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth!” (Genesis 1:26) Wow! Now that’s a great honor, that’s a privilege; but - hold on here - it is also carries with it an enormous responsibility. Having Dominion puts us in charge. That sounds good, but oh dear, it also demands that we treat the earth and everything and everyone upon it with respect and dignity and love. Dominion is a two edged sword.

I refer here mainly to our role as custodians of the good earth; but meanwhile, ponder with me over some of the other areas and ideas in your life where you have dominion, over places and people and programs, whatever; where you have the power to determine what will or will not happen, where you have the authority, more or less, to determine the future for you and others. To have dominion means that you have the power to make things happen the way you want them to. My question is how do you use that dominion?

Take for example: your family, if you have one. The Bible says that the man, the father, the husband is the head of the home, and that the wife and children should respect and obey him. (Now at this point, respectful women should try to keep from laughing out loud.) But my point is that even though the father has biblical authority and that he is usually the strongest and the loudest, if he is wise he will use his authority, his dominion, for the common good of all. He will be kind and thoughtful. He will try to be helpful to his wife and children. He will encourage all family members to do and be their best. He doesn’t have to be thoughtful and encouraging; but if he is wise, he will choose to be conscious of the needs of all the others around him. The point being that even though he has nominal Dominion, he should choose to use that authority and power wisely, for the good of all. Not all men do.

Or take the power of a person who is head of a department down at the office, or the CEO of a Company. By definition he or she has the power to make the decisions. But if that person in power is wise, others will be included in major decision making. He will listen to what the subordinates are saying. She will encourage everyone on the staff to stand up and be proud.

Or take the coach of a team in baseball or football or basketball. Head coaches, by title, are in charge. They have the authority to direct the team. They can tell this one or that one how to play, how to hit, when to run, where to kick. Now and again you see a coach who exercises that power with fury, like Bobby Knight or Woody Hayes of old. They are the exceptions to the rule. But, good coaches delegate authority to their coaching and training staffs. They encourage the initiative and individuality of their players. They protect them too, and help them to take care of themselves. They look to the team to supply imagination and ingenuity on the field. One single Head Coach cannot do it all. Having dominion is one thing, how to use it is quite another. Right?

Now to return to our point in closing this sermon: In Genesis God gave us dominion over all the earth and everything within it. Agreed. The question I have for you is what have we done and what will we do with that power and authority? In modern times at least, we have dropped the ball in caring for the earth and future. I don’t want to get involved in the politics of Global Warming, or how John McCain should talk and act about how to protect our environment. I am not a politician; I am a preacher, a minister.

What I want to share with you is the responsibility we all have to be good stewards of the earth and its life and its resources. I don’t want to argue with Rush Limbaugh about who is pulling the wool over whose eyes, and how we have been duped by the bug and berry boys and girls with their false alarms. I am not talking to Rush. I am talking to you and me.

When we stare up into the heavens and place our feet upon the solid earth, we are grateful and humbled by all that God has given. We did nothing to deserve his bounty. We were brought on stage here when God had need of us. In that humility, each and all of us, in every possible way, should take the dominion over the earth which God gave us, and use all our energy and power to protect it; to conserve the resources, to recycle, to keep a kindly eye out for abuses. We should do something courageous against cruelty to animals. Does it matter to us how they are raised and slaughtered so long as we get the kind of food we want? Should it matter how all living creatures are treated? Does it matter that our carelessness is a detriment to the health and welfare of others of God's children? More than that, we must do our part to help little children all around the globe, to give them a fair chance at life, at least enough food and potable water to survive.

We are part of this creation. If we manage to destroy it or to discolor it or to shorten its span of usefulness, we might get by, but what about the third and fourth and fourteenth generations of our family. Someday, someone we would love, will pay for our carelessness. We are called upon to join the Psalmist in his "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth." Watch it; watch it carefully. We are given dominion over all that is in the earth, for a period of time. But we are like tenant farmers, poachers really, for the land and the life does not belong to us. It belongs to the Lord of all, who one day it says directly in the Scripture we will have to account to for what we did with all we have received. This is serious business.

You and I cannot do everything. The needs around the globe are so enormous they can overwhelm us into inactivity. But in the economy of the things you believe in and all that you want to do before your days on earth are through, I ask you to determine today to add one more little step on the road to Glory: become an environmentalist. Do more to conserve energy, to dignify all of life, to stand up for what is beneficial not only to our ease of living but in keeping with our responsibility to be good stewards of the earth, the sea and the skies. If you are active there already, then enlist someone else to help with the journey. Do your part to keep the world green, beginning with yourself, your family, your community, and in all the world beyond. Organize a group activity here at Sharon Church, or in your home church if you do not come here. The Garden of Eden is gone. The eternity of Heaven is not yet here; in between the times, as theologian Karl Barth called human history, step up and step out to conserve, preserve and prosper the only place we have to live: on Planet Earth.

Christ came to save us from our personal sins. Praise the Lord. Now we can help to save the world from the community of sin and sins which violate the dignity of God's creation. You and I cannot do it all; but we do not have to do it all. We should only vow to do our part. God will find others to take care of the rest, for now and forever more. Amen.