

## The Cosmic Creator and You

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers  
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,  
on Sunday, June 12, 2022.

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31  
Psalm 8

One of my earliest memories is from when I was almost three years old. It was 1962, and I remember watching the black and white television in our living room as astronaut John Glenn lifted off from Cape Canaveral atop an Atlas rocket to become the first American to orbit the earth. For years after that, when people asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I told them I wanted to be an astronaut, just like John Glenn (who, incidentally, was also a Presbyterian).

I can't tell you how many times I reenacted that historic spaceflight with my family members and babysitters, pretending that the small broom closet was a space capsule. We took turns climbing into the broom closet, shutting the door, and launching each other into orbit after the obligatory countdown: "3-2-1-Blast Off!"

Growing up in the 1960s and '70s, during the space age, left me with a life-long interest in astronomy. I was surprised to learn recently that none other than John Calvin, a contemporary of the astronomer, Copernicus, also had an appreciation for astronomy. Calvin, the 16<sup>th</sup>-century French theologian and church reformer, who is known as "the Father of Presbyterianism," once said that "astronomy is not only pleasant, but also useful to be known; it cannot be denied that this art unfolds the admirable wisdom of God." That is my intent this morning: to unfold "the admirable wisdom of God" through the "pleasant" and "useful" "art" of astronomy.

But before I go on, I want to mention a rare astronomical event happening this month. Beginning this weekend and for the next few weeks, just before sunrise, you can see the five planets of Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn aligned in planetary order along the eastern horizon. The best time to view this rare, 5-planet alignment is 30 minutes before sunrise. The phenomenon last occurred in 2004. And it won't happen again for another 18 years, in the year 2040.

When I lived in Baltimore, my interest in astronomy led me to the Johns Hopkins University campus to visit the Space Telescope Science Institute, the research headquarters for the Hubble Space Telescope. It was a pilgrimage of sorts for me, because when I was in seminary I was shown a picture taken by the Hubble Space Telescope that profoundly moved me. It would not be an exaggeration to say that seeing that one photograph was a deeply religious experience for me. It greatly expanded my view of the universe and radically transformed my view of God and humanity. That picture, which is called the Hubble Deep Field photograph, hangs on my office wall as a reminder of our place in the universe. Here are some NASA scientists to tell you more about it.

[VIDEO]

If I ever have doubts about the existence of God, all I have to do is look at the Hubble Deep Field photograph in my office, and my belief in God, the Cosmic Creator, is renewed.

John Glenn returned to space in 1998 on the space shuttle Discovery. He was 77 years old, making him the oldest human being ever to travel in space up to that time. From the space shuttle he said: "I don't think you can be up here and look out the window as I did the first day and see the Earth from this vantage point, to look out at this kind of creation and not believe in God. To me, it's impossible—it just strengthens my faith. I wish there were words to describe what it's like. . . . truly awesome."

Chet Raymo, science writer for the *Boston Globe*, says: "The Hubble Deep Field photo opens us to a cosmos of capacious grandeur—a universe of 50 billion galaxies blowing like snowflakes in a cosmic storm . . . The fourteenth-century mystic Julian of Norwich asked, 'What is the use of praying if God does not answer?' In that wonderful image of more than 1,000 galaxies caught by a magnificent instrument lofted into space by a questioning creature, God answers."

The Hubble Deep Field photographs remind me that in the cosmic scale of things, human beings are about as significant as specks of dust. And yet, God cares for us. We are infinitesimally small, and yet we are infinitely precious. It is a marvel—as much to us as it was to the person who wrote Psalm 8 more than 2,000 years ago: "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars

that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?"

Psalm 8 has the distinction of being the first biblical text to reach the moon. It was taken there by the Apollo 11 astronauts, who left a silicon disk on the moon containing messages from 73 nations. The Vatican contributed the text of Psalm 8 to be included on that silicon disk.

Not only is God mindful of us. Not only does God care for us as we hurtle through space on this tiny planet we call earth. The Psalmist says that God actually elevates our status as human beings.

"You have made them a little lower than God," the Psalmist writes, "and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas."

Psalm 8 suggests that human beings are God's representatives on earth. We are given royal standing in God's realm. God gives us dominion, or sovereignty, or control, over the inhabitants of the earth. God makes us partners in the care of creation. In doing so, God has made the risky choice of sharing divine power with us.

But the power we have, the human sovereignty God gives us, is bounded by God's sovereignty. Note how the psalm is structured. It begins and ends with the same sentence—a proclamation of God's sovereignty: "O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!"

Given our amazing technological achievements, we would like to think that our human capabilities are limitless. But we do have limits. Ultimately, we are finite, mortal creatures, entirely dependent upon God. When we attempt to live beyond the limits God has placed on us, we invite disaster. Indeed, we see frightening signs of ecological disaster all around us—the global spread of viruses; rising sea levels; record droughts and floods; severe storms; catastrophic wildfires; deforestation; desertification; polluted air, water, and soil; the mass extinction of species—as we attempt to live beyond our limits.

I am fond of quoting the prophet Micah. “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?” I usually focus on the doing justice part or the loving kindness part. Today, the focus is on that third part—walking humbly with God.

In the cosmic scale of things, we are little more than specks of dust. And at the same time, we are made just a little lower than God. We walk humbly with God—the Creator and Sustainer of the entire universe.

Our planet is a miraculous gift from God. Life is a precious gift from God. All that we are and all that we have are gifts from God and are meant to be shared, not only among human beings, but among all living species with whom we share this planet. That's what stewardship is all about: using wisely the resources God has entrusted to our care on this good, green earth for the common good of all—every human being and every living creature.

We would do well to remember the words of Adlai Stevenson, who helped found the United Nations and served as the U.S. Ambassador to the UN under President Kennedy. Stevenson said: "We travel together, passengers on a little spaceship, dependent on its vulnerable supplies of air and soil, all committed for our safety to its security and peace, preserved from annihilation only by the care, the work, and I will say, the love we give our fragile craft." May we take his eloquent words to heart. May we love and care for this fragile planet—the earth—and all its inhabitants. It's the only home we have. Amen.