

God and Cosmos

From the sermon series on the Cosmos

Text: Hebrews 11:3

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

*By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God...
Hebrews 11: 3*

If you had come past my home last evening about 10 o'clock, you might have thought that I was really desperate, for you would have seen me with my cap and coat, out on the deck with my telescope, gazing at the moon and surveying the stars. And you might have figured that, after a week's vacation, having played all week, at the eleventh hour I was desperately looking for a message in the stars to bring you. Such would not have been the case, of course, for the message was well under way by then. But having reflected all week long on the fantastic cosmos of which we are a part, having already savored the wonder of yesterday - the clear air, the blue sky, the radiant sun; walking along the beach with its lapping water, cold and clear as crystal; having seen the magnificent sun slip into the sea in the West, and then the stars glimmering in the night heavens providing a fit setting for the silvery brilliance of the moon, I thought to myself, why not get out of the study and savor it even more? And so, I did. With my telescope, I gazed at the moon and I located a star or two and thought to myself that it is true -

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth!... When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast established; what is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him? Psalm 8: 1, 3, 4 (RSV)

The depth of eternity symbolized in the immensity of space in this vast cosmos of which we are a part, is but a finger pointing beyond itself to Him Who, in the beginning, created the heavens and the earth.

I am sure we all identify with the awe, the sense of majesty which is reflected in this psalm of wonder and praise. I am sure we have all had the experience on a starry night when the atmosphere was clear as it was last night and the sky cloudless. We have looked up and we have wondered at it, and then we have

found peace and comfort in the conviction that this is our Father's world. The glories of the cosmos are a reflection of the glory of God. For, as the writer to the Hebrews says in the words of our text taken from the 11th chapter,

By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God.

By faith. It is certainly by faith. It is our conviction that He Who revealed Himself supremely in the face of Jesus and Whom, through Jesus, we have found to be gracious, is the Creator of the heavens and the earth. And, believing that, we have found a home. We know this is our Father's world.

This is the first of a series of messages about God and Cosmos. *God* and *Cosmos*, in that order, because I do believe that God is prior to Cosmos, and Cosmos is the consequence of the deliberate intention of God to call into being that which was not. *All that is, is because God said, "Let there be."* I deal with this right now because I am currently viewing the television series, the 13-part *Cosmos* series, which is written and narrated by Carl Sagan, who must be one of the world's finest astronomers, and who is, besides being an excellent scientist, an outstanding communicator. I hope that you have seen some of that series and, if not, I hope that you will, for it is an amazing production. The photography is thrilling, the technical aspects of it are superbly handled, and the communication skills of Carl Sagan are something to behold. As I view that series, it causes me to look beyond the cosmos to the creator of it all, to experience again what the psalmist experienced, and to say within my heart, "O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is Thy name in all the earth."

Carl Sagan would not agree with the psalmist or with you and me that the cosmos is the consequence of the deliberate, creative act of God. Carl Sagan is an excellent scientist and an excellent communicator and I acclaim the job that he has done. I want to go on record as saying that I think it is tremendous that the depths and the deep secrets of the physical universe are being more and more unraveled in this wonderful way through this marvelous medium, by this great communicator. For he is skilled, not only in his understanding of the universe, but in his ability to make the profound simple. And when he is an astronomer, a scientist, and when he is setting forth all of that data which is available through the explosion of knowledge and through the use of instrumentation which is so sophisticated that it boggles the mind, then I listen intently and I learn.

This past week I spent the week trying to master the book which is the narration of the video series. It is entitled, *Cosmos*. It's a very big and beautiful book, and a very expensive book. I recommend it. When Carl Sagan is a scientist and an astronomer, I learn a great deal. When he ceases to be an astronomer and a scientist and becomes a philosopher and a theologian, then he has moved into my territory and I carry on a dialogue with him. As long as he is talking about protons and neutrons and quasars and pulsars and galaxies and all of that, then I am an innocent bystander listening in and learning and eagerly so. When he becomes a philosopher and a theologian, then I say, "Carl, let's talk about that."

Now, a scientist has every right to be a theologian and a philosopher, and I suppose most all of them really are, because all of us finally are. The difficulty comes when the two are so closely intertwined that one hardly knows whether this is the result of the data gathered through some radioscope, testing the outer limits of space, or whether it is the configuration conjured in the mind and heart of the scientist. When he becomes a philosopher and theologian, then I take exception to him, because then he would not agree with our Judeo-Christian tradition, our conviction that all that is, is as a consequence of the Word of God. He would commit Genesis and the Letter to the Hebrews and the great Psalms to that great body of myth and fable which is a part of the common human experience. Every people who have ever lived have had some kind of an explanation, some kind of a myth which explains why there is anything. And Carl Sagan would lump our Biblical tradition with all of those religious and semi-religious explanations for the fact that there is something rather than nothing. It is at that point that I would differ with him and call him to account.

He is a materialist. Now, a materialist is one who believes that, finally, everything can be reduced to matter or energy. Now, you all understand Einstein's Theory of Relativity, which says that those two are interchangeable, that mass and energy are interchangeable, that finally, ultimately, the building blocks of reality are very simply molecules that can be reduced to energy. So a materialist believes that, finally, you can reduce the whole of reality to energy, electricity if you will, to chemical reactions, so that the emotions that we feel are the result of chemical reactions and nerve connections, and so forth. A materialist believes that the whole of reality and the totality of human experience can be reduced to that which is material, physical.

Now, in saying that, he has to deal with the fact that you and I are intelligent and we are conscious. We are self-conscious people. We can reflect back upon ourselves, we know that we exist, we think about ourselves, for better or worse. And we have an intelligence. We can communicate. He would say that there may be intelligent beings in other universes. If there are, we don't know about it. They haven't signaled us yet, nor have they returned our signal. But, be that as it may, as far as we are concerned, and after all we can only deal here with planet Earth, the highest form of the cosmic evolutionary process has resulted in human intelligence and human consciousness. We are the only beings that know that we are. We are the only beings with the intelligence and the self-consciousness to reflect on the cosmic process of which we are a part. And, consequently, if everything can be reduced down to that point of energy or matter, then human intelligence and human consciousness and human emotion, likewise, can be reduced down and be explained in terms of electricity, chemical reaction, etc. And that would mean, of course, that we are at the top of the ladder. This is as far as the process has gotten. And that would mean, of course, that there is no higher rung as yet realized. Who knows what may be up there? One might say that humans have become godlike. Human existence with its intelligence and

consciousness is the highest rung of the ladder at this point and, consequently, with nothing beyond, there can be no one beyond.

A materialist explains the totality of the cosmos in terms of the building blocks of reality that are reducible in the laboratory. Human intelligence and consciousness may be praised and affirmed and acclaimed. It is the highest development of the cosmic process. There is no one beyond. Such is the view of the materialist. Such a one is a naturalist. He would be a humanist, too, I suppose.

But you and I believe more than that. As long as Carl Sagan is an astronomer and a scientist, we learn; we learn with fascination and with eagerness. We marvel at the ingenuity of the human mind, at the intellectual powers of an Einstein, the exploratory endeavors of Galileo and Copernicus, Kepler and the whole host of those who have probed the depths of reality and given us today such an amazing insight into the cosmic order. It is exciting and fascinating and we ought to affirm that in the Church.

When Carl Sagan has said everything he has to say, he has not yet dealt with the religious question. Being a materialist, he has planted his feet squarely within this cosmos, whereas you and I see the totality of the cosmos as the consequence of the creative act of One Who transcends the cosmos, Who is not encased within the system of which we are a part, with our galaxies and our planets and our stars. We look to One Who is beyond, One Who stands apart from and Who spoke and called into being that which did not previously exist. By faith, we believe the worlds were fashioned by the Word of God. That God was, and nothing else was, and God spoke, and it came to be. That is the affirmation of the Letter to the Hebrews, the reflection of that first chapter where he sees the cosmos to the extent that he was able to understand it and he says,

...they will perish, but thou remainest; they will all grow old like a garment, like a mantle thou wilt roll them up, and they will be changed. But thou art the same, and thy years will never end. Hebrews 1: 11-12

Or the psalmist who said, "O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is Thy name in all the earth." When I consider the heavens, the moon, the stars which you have made, my worship is not offered, as it has been through so many ages of humankind, to the stars and the moon or the sun or the cosmic order itself, but to the God Who is apart from it and brought it into being. That is the Biblical tradition. That is the Judeo-Christian faith. It is our faith.

And so we study the cosmos. As we view such a marvelous presentation as the television *Cosmos* series, we are fascinated and we marvel at the wonders, the complexity and the simplicity of the created order. But we always look beyond, and then we know this amazing place is our Father's world.

We have learned a lot through the research of astrophysics. They tell us that 15 to 20 billion years ago this universe was formed. Science, itself, has formulated what is today the most accepted model of origin - the "Big Bang." There was a high concentration of energy and mass, almost a pinpoint. And from that intense concentration of energy evolved a nuclear explosion that scattered the elements in every direction, from which explosion we can still, through very delicate radiosopes, hear the pulsing of radiation. From that Big Bang 15 to 20 billion years ago, this whole cosmic order of which we are a part emanated. They tell us that it is still expanding like a balloon. If you blow up a balloon that has polka dots on it, the polka dots keep getting farther apart, but they remain relatively in the same position on that sphere. And so, this universe is going outward. They tell us if there is enough mass within this expanding universe, the force of gravity will eventually stop the expansion, that it will, in turn, contract so that after the Big Bang will come the Big Crunch. And then, they tell us, possibly with that Big Crunch and that high concentration again, there will be another nuclear explosion that will start the whole process over again.

Does it make any difference to Genesis? Does it make any difference to Hebrews or to Psalm 8? Not a smidgin, really. For, who knows what God is up to? Who knows what fantastic things He has in store for this, our planet Earth, which is just a little speck of dust occupying an instant of time in this dramatic, cosmic, evolutionary process. But on this little speck of dust, in this instant of time, we exist, conscious and intelligent, able to reflect on the process and to adore the God Who is behind it all.

What we have learned about space is so amazing. For example, they talk about black holes. I wish I understood black holes. In the next life I'm going to conduct great music. The third life I want to be an astrophysicist. I have never had a physics course in my life, and I am really out of my element. But, anyway, try to understand the black holes. Have you ever pulled the plug in a basin of water? You pull the plug in the sink and the water goes down the drain. If you had good drainage, the water was pulled down forming a whirlpool over the drain. Well, they say that where there is a high concentration of energy from the collapse of a great big star, maybe four or five times bigger than our sun, there is such a concentration of gravity that it rushes right out of the universe. Like if you had your hand inside the balloon and pushed it out. That gravity is so great, so intense, that it doesn't even let the light out, so that you look in the sky and there is a black hole. (You can't see the black hole where the star was, but you know that the star was there because there is such a strong emanation of x-rays from that point that they can tell by the radiosopes that it is there.) It is a tremendous source of power. Well, even Carl Sagan says that those black holes might be the shoots that would send us from one universe to another.

I was thinking about the book *Life After Life*, and all the stories of those who have edged right up to death and then come back. They talk about that tunnel of light. Who knows but maybe it's a black hole? It's a black hole from the outside, but

inside, the light is there, you see. Does it make any difference to Genesis, or Psalm 8, or the Letter to the Hebrews? Not a bit. The more we learn, the more we probe, the more we understand, the more wonder, the more sense of awe, because of the majesty, the mind-boggling nature of the cosmic order.

Our earth, 4.6 billion years old, part of a cosmic evolutionary process 15 to 20 billion years old. They say if you took a few baseballs and scattered them on the North American continent they would be crowded compared to the stars in space. And our galaxy, the Milky Way, has four billion stars, and our galaxy is in what they call the Local Cluster, a relatively small cluster. There are numberless galaxies. Sagan writes,

We live on a mote of dust circling a humdrum star in the remotest corner of an obscure galaxy. And if we are a speck in the immensity of space, we also occupy an instant in the expanse of ages. *Cosmos*, p. 20f.

Can you begin to take it in? I cannot. But whoever said God wasn't big? And whoever said God lacked power? By faith, we understand that the worlds were fashioned by the Word of God, and the more we learn, the more we stand in awe of One Who stands apart from and creates the heavens and the earth and this place for you and for me.

When the Bible affirms that God created, it doesn't mean to tell us all of the scientific details about where everything came from, or the process by which it arose. The Church too long has used the Bible that way, as a scientific text. And because of that kind of use of the Bible there has been the unnecessary and tragic conflict between science and religion. The Bible simply is trying to say that God is at the beginning and God is at the end, and whatever exists, this cosmic evolutionary process contains nothing that can be threatening to you and to me, because God is at the beginning and God is at the end. And when the Bible says Creation is good, it simply is saying that it is a good place for us to develop and to grow in the grace and the knowledge of Jesus Christ. And when it says that God called into being that which exists from nothing, it is simply affirming that there is nothing in the cosmic order that can be threatening, because God is sovereign and Lord over all. That is really all we are saying, but that is to say tremendous things about our human existence, and the cosmic order of which we are a part.

I am excited about this, because I believe too long in the Church there has been an atmosphere of fear and an attitude of defensiveness. I grew up being threatened by science. I grew up fearing every new discovery. I grew up wishing there would be no more explosion of knowledge, fearing that somehow or other, the faith and the things that were most dear to me would be exploded by some new view under a microscope or some distant vista from a telescope.

The Church's history is tragic: Catholic and Protestant. Johann Kepler was excommunicated by the Lutheran Church in the 17th Century, and Galileo was put under house arrest the last years of his life by the Roman Church for simply

affirming what he knew was true, that the earth went around the sun rather than vice versa. The Church's record is tragic, to be repented of, and the Church too often continues to react negatively to the increase of knowledge. It stifles creative thought and experimentation and offends its best spirits and drives out its finest minds.

I am excited about this, because I believe that we can allow the fresh air, knowledge and research and investigation to flow through the Church, and then, if we have faith enough, we can stand with the psalmist and say, "Lord, our Lord, how excellent is Thy name in all the earth. When I consider the heavens, the moon and the stars which You have made, then from my heart arises wonder, love and praise." By faith we believe that the worlds were fashioned by the word of God, and whatever is out there of which we are a part, whatever its future, and whatever its past, it is encompassed in the eternal love of God, Who has manifested Himself as Grace and touched us in the flesh of Jesus. Blessed be His holy name. Amen.

Father, we revel in the wonder of the Created Order, the mind-boggling experience of the natural world, and we rejoice in the confidence that we have that we have a home here, that this is our Father's world, and that you uphold all things by the power of your word. Receive our adoring worship, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.