

God, Humanity and Cosmos

From the sermon series on the Cosmos

Text: Psalm 8: 4-5
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

What is man that thou art mindful of him, ...dost care for him? Yet thou hast made him a little less than God. Psalm 8: 4-5

Through a happy coincidence, this was an exciting week in the old U.S. of A. as we once again accomplished a great triumph of science and technology, sending into space again our Spaceship Columbia, watching it blast off with all of the drama of those moments, and then, in order that we might report its safe return this morning, the mission was shortened, and they came back yesterday. Exciting, really, isn't it? And doesn't it boggle the mind to think about the human potential, to think about what human intelligence is able to effect? Isn't it amazing, really, when you contemplate the nature of such events? Truly it is thrilling. Yet we become so easily accustomed to the dramatic and the sensational. If we were to tell our forefathers that these things were happening, they wouldn't believe it. They would say it was impossible. At best they might say, "Well, it's a miracle." Well, it is a miracle, in a sense. But in another sense, it is simply that the human mind has been able to probe the secrets of reality in order to accomplish a mission like that and continue the exploration of the cosmos.

I kidded about them bringing the spacecraft home early so that we would know this morning that they were successful, but, as a matter of fact, that decision was made, though not for that reason. As I was thinking about Psalm 2 and the psalmist's reflection upon the cosmos and then upon himself, who he was in relationship to God, I thought that decision was a rather nice illustration of the second Psalm, for a choice was made in favor of human life over the probing of the cosmos. If the psalmist was impressed with the cosmos, then how much more you and me? If he was impressed with what he could see, which was but an infinitesimal fragment of what there is, if he was impressed with his smallness over against the vastness of space and the eons of time, which are becoming more and more clear to us, then how much more must we be impressed with our smallness and our insignificance? And yet, when one of the three fuel cells of that spacecraft failed, a decision had to be made as to whether to let the mission run its course, or to bring it home early. Two fuel cells were enough to allow the

mission to take its full run. But then, down to two, if one should fail, the mission and human life would be in jeopardy. And so, at headquarters, discussion was held and the decision was made. They came home early, even though involved were scores and scores of people, and millions and millions of dollars and all of that which is at stake. They brought that mission home early because in this nation, standing in the biblical tradition, we know the value and the sanctity of human life. And when it comes to taking a risk and succeeding with a few more scientific experiments, but placing at the same time, human life in jeopardy, there is really no question, because we know in the face of space's immensity and time's ever-rolling stream, that there is still one thing that counts supremely, and that is a human being.

Now that is really the same kind of conclusion that the psalmist came to. On the one hand, he said,

Lord, when I consider the heavens, the moon and the stars which you have ordained, what is man that you are mindful of him? And the son of man, that you care for him?

He felt his smallness and his insignificance. He was overwhelmed by the immensity of the heavens overhead, and he recognized that his days were but a brief span of time. His littleness in the vastness of it all gave him such a sense of insignificance and smallness.

As I said, if he felt small, how about us? We have to say that in our own day there have been a lot of people who have been unable to move with the modern conception of the universe and maintain a faith in God the Creator. The psalmist had a correct intuition. I mean, who are we, really, when you think of it? Fifteen to twenty billion years in the process, and now we are here, threescore years and ten, perhaps. Why, our lifespan is a blink of the eye. And when you realize, as Carl Sagan says in his book, *Cosmos*, that the earth is a speck of dust, circling a humdrum star, our sun - just an average old humdrum star - you begin to realize the vastness of the cosmos. We are on a speck of dust circling a humdrum star in a corner of an insignificant galaxy; and if we are on but a speck of dust in the vastness of space, so are our days but an instant in the eons of time. When you really stop to think about it, I mean when you *really* stop to contemplate it, can you still believe that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth?

You see, there have been many of our contemporaries who have not been able to make that move and that adjustment. We have opened up the mysteries of the cosmos, and it is a most exciting day in which to be alive. But what has to happen is not only that the cosmos expands before our eyes, but our conception of God must grow commensurately. As J.B. Phillips wrote so many years ago, *Your God Is Too Small*.

We have to admit, too, that in the Church we have not been very good at helping people to make this adjustment.

In the most recent issue of *Science* '81, an excellent magazine which was placed in my hands, there is a centerfold on Creationism – Creationism as opposed to Evolutionism, and all of the controversy that is being stirred up by the fundamentalist wing of the Christian Church today. It recounts how several states have gone to court to get equal time for the doctrine of Creation in their schools. It is a very interesting development. This is a science magazine. And in this report it was stated what we have been saying here over and over again, that all of the scientific investigation of the cosmos, whether in biology or physics or geology or in whatever field - all of these investigations really do not impinge upon whether or not God created the heavens and the earth, and whether or not I can still believe that this is my Father's world. That really isn't at issue. But the problem with the fundamentalist wing of the Church that is stirring up all this controversy is that it is creating, once again, that overagainstness with science, and that mindset in much of the Christian Church that there is something destructive to faith in all of this explosion of knowledge in the natural sciences. That is tragic. We do ourselves a great disservice.

If you feel good when you see some television evangelist pounding the pulpit and talking in terms of creation over against a godless, atheistic evolutionism, don't clap, because he is not on your side, if you are on the side of God and Truth. That is a false distinction, that is a false antithesis, and it is deadly. It is deadly because it offends the best minds and the best spirits, and it creates the illusion that to be a Christian you have to take off your head, shut down your mind and refuse to survey the vast amount of data that is there for anyone with any common sense. We can't play that game any longer. We have to admit that what the psalmist saw, the immensity of the universe and the eons of time and all of this which has become even more clear to us will necessitate an adjustment of our understanding of God.

We simply cannot have this neat, secure little world, little planet Earth and our few thousands of years and our literal, biblical account of things, because, you see, the biblical writers were not writing physics, were not writing biology, were not talking about geology. The writers of the Bible thought that this was a three-story universe, with heaven above and the waters under the earth. God didn't whisper in their ears and give them some revelation of the mysteries of physics. This is not a science textbook, and you cannot find out about the process of the created order, you cannot find out about the stages which have brought us to this present point by going to the scriptures. The only thing the scriptures will tell you, and of course the only thing that really matters, is that in the beginning was God, and that He will be in the end, and that He is with us in the meantime.

When the psalmist looked up and thought, "Oh my goodness, I'm not much," then how much more we, and we simply have to recognize that we need to do some readjusting because, as a matter of fact, this old, cosmological, evolutionary process has been going on for a long, long time. There is no doubt about that. And it has been following a course of natural development which now is more and

more understood, with many mysteries still to be unraveled, but which will be unraveled. We live in a day which is right at the crest of a breakthrough that will continue to explode and explode and explode all around us. The more we learn, the more access we have to deeper mysteries, and when you saw Columbia come in and land right on the second and right on the line, that is simply a sign and a finger pointing beyond itself to the most fantastic dreams that are even now welling up in human hearts and minds. Never say never! Because before you die, it will have happened.

But *the psalmist had another insight, and that is the critical insight*, for he not only experienced his smallness and his insignificance, but he went on to say, "*Thou hast created him a little less than God. Thou hast crowned him with glory and honor. Thou hast given him dominion over the whole created order.*" That is the biblical insight. That is the significant fact. That is the uniqueness of being human. That is the religious issue, for it doesn't really matter how long it's been going on, and it doesn't really matter how vast the immensity of space. The fact is that we are here now at this point in the process, and we are human. The psalmist recognized that there is something about being human which is nearly divine. And if I were to put it in a sentence, I would say to you this morning that the message is simply this - *You are really something*. That's the biblical message. We may be impressed with distance, and we may be impressed with age, but what we really ought to stand in awe before is the mystery of being human, the wonder of what it is to be man and woman, created in the image of God, for what the psalmist was saying here when he said, "*Thou hast made him a little less than God,*" was what the writer of the Genesis account was saying when he said, "*God created man and woman in His own image.*" God created a creature over against himself and made him almost divine. He created a creature with self-consciousness and with a measure of freedom and self-determination, and with responsibility and the opportunity to fall in worship and adoring praise before the Creator of it all.

You are really something! To be human is the greatest mystery reflecting the deepest majesty of the whole cosmological process.

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? Yet thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honor. Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands... Psalm 8: 3-6

We are created to be the co-laborers with God, partners with God in this creative process. We are endowed with gifts, with human potential, and we have the powers and the ability to reflect the divine image. We can think His thoughts after Him, and we can enter into His creative activity, and with the things that have already been accomplished through the exercise of human intelligence, who

would dare say what the frontier finally would be? You are really something, and good religion will affirm human personality.

Now, we need to hear that in the Church, too, don't we, because for too long we have spoken disparagingly of human personality. Nothing I say this morning would in any way detract from the fact which we have faced honestly that there is something desperately wrong with us all and we fall short of the glory of God. There is a meanness about us and a contrariness; someone, somewhere has thrown a wrench in the works, and man's inhumanity to man is given eloquent testimony from beginning to end. But in the Church, so often that is where we have left it. We talk about our misery and fail to talk about our grandeur. We talk about our fallenness and fail to take in the destiny to which we have been called.

God has dealt with our sin, and by His grace, calls us to realize our destiny and to develop the full potential with which he has endowed us, and to reflect the divine image. You are really somebody. You reflect God. You were created in His image, a little less than Him, and He has created us in order to be in relationship with Him, to live in communion, and to live not only in communion with Him, but in communion one with another, and in interpersonal relationships where there is love and care and forgiveness and grace. There is a little bit of heaven. God and His creature, living in fellowship and communion, one with another and with Him, define the ultimate miracle and the meaning of the whole process.

Now, that is terribly important to affirm and it ought to make you feel really good about yourself, because you really are somebody. You have potential untapped, you have gifts yet undreamed of, you have possibilities without limit. You are almost divine, and God calls us to that upward way more and more to respond to that destiny for which he has shaped us, to be prepared for the future that He has for us.

Now, when you watch Carl Sagan on *Cosmos*, be enrapt with him in the excitement of exploring the mysteries of the physical world. And I affirm that, and I love it, and when you study it, as I have more and more, you are so impressed with the simplicity on the other side of complexity. The complexity of the cosmos and humankind seems so apparent. But once the smoke has cleared there appears a simplicity in the created order. All of us and all matter is made up of the same building blocks, the same atoms, the same fundamental elements, whether here on planet Earth or the moon or Jupiter or the sun or your beating, human heart. Everything, being composed of very simple and fundamental elements, seems to reflect a divine intelligence which can hardly be conceived of. But when you watch Carl Sagan and he begins to suggest that that process that has moved through all of the eons of time and all of that evolutionary process to the present moment is purposeless, the product of chance, when he begins to suggest that you are the latest and highest expression, and that there is no one beyond, then don't you believe him, for then he is no longer a scientist; then he is in the sphere of religion. He suggests that maybe the universes are not the

dreams of God, but rather, that God may be the dream of man. He is saying that we have come to this point and then we have simply projected out, beyond ourselves the God that we wish were there.

When he begins to talk that way, he has lost me. Then he has said that I am simply the consequence of all of that process of development having really no freedom and no unique spiritual character, related to all that went before but missing completely that relationship to Him Who is beyond and above. Then I know that he has missed the ultimate truth. Nothing that he says about our relationship to the cosmos is in any way in conflict to that relationship we have with a God Who spoke and called it into being. But to deny that God and to end up here is to leave me alone without a home and without meaning. Human existence, then, is the chance result of spontaneous reactions along billions of years. His explanation for the first development of life is that in a primeval soup one cell got the ability to reproduce itself and then through billions of years, organizing by perhaps a light ray striking a cell and causing a change, a mutation, and finally organizing and gathering and getting more and more complex, until finally one glob of cells woke up and said, "Well, here I am." Now, that takes faith to believe.

When we contemplate what it is to be human, then we need not deny that whole process. But to me, it makes far more sense to believe that in the beginning there was an Intelligence that said, "Let there be..." with a purpose, and a purpose of love that moved the process to a point at which one day there was someone who looked into the face of God and experienced relationship, communion.

For finally, what is ultimate and what is important?

At NASA this week they made a decision, and a correct decision, for there is really nothing in the whole cosmos, there is no experiment, there is no technological breakthrough so important and so pressing that it would be worth placing in jeopardy one human life, one human life that knows itself as free and in relationship, able to love and to care.

A couple of weeks ago when Nancy and I were at Mayo's, we did a lot of sitting and waiting for our names to be called. You watch a lot of people and a lot of people in various states of difficulty and need. It's always obvious when, for example, a son or a daughter has brought an aged parent, maybe in a wheelchair or helping them along to the desk. You think a lot about people and you watch them. Nancy was telling me about two old gentlemen, the one helping the other, hobbling along, finally getting to the desk because his name had been called, and the other who was helping said to the nurse, "Is it all right if I go in with him? You know, he's my brother."

Well, you know, to me that's more impressive than a thousand billion galaxies. Isn't it, really? What finally counts? We stand not in any conflict with any scientific probe of the depths of reality. Half of the physicists are mystics, trying

to determine the nature of what is. That is an exciting venture; it is a human venture. But we do stand in the midst of the darkness of space and the eons of time to say that, whatever else may be, this is ultimately important — we are, and we know one another, and we have learned to love and to care because into our lives, in our own flesh, has appeared Jesus. Jesus, in whose face we have seen the light of the knowledge of the glory of God, and found Him to be gracious.

Ah, you are really something! You are really somebody. There are no limits to the possibilities that await you and, as the writer to the Hebrews recognized, what we see now is only a part. We see Jesus, not yet all things put into subjection to him, but the whole tenor of that New Testament, in the wake of Jesus, tells us that there is a future, the contours of which we have not yet begun to dream about. For eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man to conceive of the things that God has prepared for them that love Him.

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. I John 3: 1f (RSV)

And what we shall be has not yet appeared, but we know that when He appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And throughout all Eternity we will be brothers and sisters with our Lord, lost in wonder, love and praise of the God Who spoke and called all things into being. Blessed be His holy name. Amen.