

This morning we are having a Garden service focused on the heavens, using some verses from our assigned text, Psalm 89, that reference our Lord as the Creator of the heavens. We read, “Let the heavens praise your wonders, O Lord, your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones. For who in the skies can be compared to the Lord? Who among the heavenly beings is like the Lord? The heavens are yours, the earth is also.” It’s a good day for us to think about the glory, the beauty, and the mystical order of the heavens all around our precious planet earth. It’s the perfect season to heighten our awareness of the brightness of the sun against a blue day time sky; the whiteness of the moon against the dark night sky; the movements and patterns of stars and planets all around us, all the time, of which we are often largely unaware. In fact, we all too easily forget to take notice of the heavens at all, whether by day or by night.

One of the times we may notice the night sky is traditionally on the Fourth of July, when we head out to watch fireworks once it’s dark. Some may hang out along the Knife River Beach, some go up to Two Harbors, some to Duluth. I can remember a few years ago when Phil and I headed to the Rose Garden to see the Duluth fireworks display. It was a perfect night, a clear sky filled with twinkling stars and a full moon rising. We were privileged to see together, from our perspective, the fireworks, the stars, the moon, and the Lift Bridge, and it was an awe-inducing sight. This year, of course, there will be no large scale fire work celebrations. The stars, the moon, and the lift bridge will still be there, however. As will the night sky view from Two Harbors or on the Knife River beach. Fireworks or no, Fourth of July or any other night, this is the time of year to enjoy the mild night weather and gaze upwards in wonder. So much to see

when we look up; so big and vast the heavens, the universe, in which we live; so filled with miracles and creations beyond our comprehension.

What do you think of when you look up at the heavens? Do you think about the first humans to walk on the moon? Do you think about space stations? Do you try to identify the constellations? I don't actually know much about the universe, off hand, so I looked up some facts about the heavens to stretch our imaginations a bit as we consider our focus this morning. In terms of size and numbers, are you aware that scientists believe there are about 10 billion trillion stars in the universe? That's a 1 followed by 22 zeros, in case you're wondering. In fact, there are probably more stars in existence than grains of sand on all of the world's beaches. The heavens are incomprehensibly vast and huge. As are many of these stars and planets individually. To consider even just our own sun's size, 1 million earths could fit into the sun. Again, it's nearly beyond comprehension. And those stars have a lot to do with *us*; turns out we are literally made out of star stuff. Any element heavier than hydrogen originated in the stars, and we are definitely composed of more than just hydrogen. Calcium, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, oxygen and around 60 other basic ingredients make up a human being. Since hydrogen and helium were the only elements around before the stars "cooked" up some more, it's a safe bet that most of the substance that constitutes the "physical" you comes from the stars. In truth, we are made of star dust! Might make us stand a littler taller, don't you think?

If we move from size to time, we might consider how *old* the heavens are, and how short our stint as humanity actually is. If we scaled the entire timeline of the cosmos to a calendar

year, the entire recorded history of human life to present day would be 14 seconds. 14 seconds out of an entire year! Are we really so sure it's all about us?

And let's think about speed and motion for just a moment. Because, even when you're standing still, you're moving. A human body, or any object on the Earth, is never at rest. Even when you're asleep in bed, you're moving pretty fast. Our Milky Way Galaxy is rotating at 225 kilometers per second, and hurling through the cosmos at an estimated 305 kilometers per second. Put those figures together, and we're racing through space at around 530 kilometers, or 330 miles, per second. So in one minute's time, you've traveled more than 12,000 miles. And you thought you weren't getting to travel during this pandemic time!

Size, distance, time, motion, speed—it's all there and it's hard to bend our brains around it, even just a little. And God is at the heart of it all and a part of it all and beyond it all—also hard to bend our brains around. But from the perspective of Scripture and our faith, the heavens aren't just a soul-less, cold, vast emptiness; they are a creation of God that praises God and is held together by God. And the heavens, in the imagination and faith of our Scripture writers, are populated by more than just stars and planets. Psalm 89 and many others speak of the “heavenly host”-- a reference to angelic armies and choirs. Our psalm also makes reference to the “council of the holy ones” and to “heavenly beings”, which are certainly a stretch for our imaginations. As William Shakespeare once eloquently wrote, “There are more things in heaven and Earth... than are dreamt of in your philosophy”. That's for sure! And it's all connected, from the supernova at the farthest reaches of the heavens to the hummingbirds at our backyard feeders; only God could somehow hold together the large and the small, the vast and the intricate, with

such perfection and beauty. And if we put in some effort to spend time looking up and learning, we are led to praise God, and we enhance our sense of wonder.

When I was a teenager, I read the novel “The Robe” by Lloyd Douglas, and I still remember a comparison made within the novel between the poets of the ancient Greco/Roman world and the poets of the ancient Hebrew Scriptures. Speaking of the Greco/Roman poets versus the writers of the Hebrew psalms, one character said, “they pick flowers, but they do not sweep the sky.” And it is true that there are numerous psalms and sacred poems within the Old Testament, and the New Testament also, for that matter, that “sweep the sky”. We are asked repeatedly in psalms like the one today, to look up, to consider the heavens, to ponder the infinite majesty and order thereof. This is one of the legacies of our faith; we are invited to broaden our horizons rather literally as we recognize that there is more to this world and universe than we might usually recognize or dream of. It’s good to consider and pick the flowers, but it’s also crucial to sweep the sky.

And here’s why I think that matters. It’s very easy, as humans, to become so very preoccupied with whatever is right in front of us. Both our sorrows and our joys, and certainly our troubles and worries, can occupy a great deal of the psychological horizon for any one of us. It’s not that those things don’t merit attention; they do. But there is more to life than our immediate preoccupations. And looking up and out and around us is one of the ways we are reminded of that. Not only might that give us a little better perspective on things, it also can reassure us as to God’s resourcefulness, creativity, and might. Thinking about the incredible intricacy, the interrelated parts, *and* the order with which all of that works astonishingly well

together; *these* are reflections that may reassure us that God has a handle on our problems too.

That the God who came up with sunrises and sunsets and the phases of the moon can also make a way forward for us. That the God who brings order out of the chaotic stuff of the heavens can also bring order to the chaotic stuff of our world, struggling with the coronavirus, with racial injustice, with economic upheaval. Add in killer hornets from Asia, plagues of locusts in Asia and Africa, and now a huge dust cloud blowing towards the southeastern United States, and you can only say---seriously? What next?

That's when I think it helps to look up and out and around. To broaden our horizons by intentionally taking in the majesty and order and glory of the heavens. And to acknowledge that they, like us, are the creation of a wise and loving God, who looks to bring wisdom and love to us and to our world. Which is why I really, really love the hymn that's about to happen. It begins with these words:

The perfect wisdom of our God,

Revealed in all the universe:

All things created by His hand,

And held together at His command.

He knows the mysteries of the seas,

The secrets of the stars are His;

He guides the planets on their way,

And turns the earth through another day.

That's the God we know, love, serve, and praise. Amen.