

Sunday, October 4, 2015
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12; Psalm 8

The Total Perspective Vortex

The book of Hebrews, an ancient letter to the early Christian church, is one of the most philosophically and linguistically complex books of the New Testament. The vocabulary is sophisticated, the sentences elegant, the arguments intricate. And then there's the subject matter. It begins, as we heard in the second reading today, with ruminations on time and space and on the relationship between humanity and divinity. The writer connects the history of Israel to the revelation in Christ: "Long ago, God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son." Long ago, to these last days, and in these last days, a Son.

The letter then considers, "What is the Son's place in the cosmos?" A millennium and a half before the Copernican revolution, the writer of Hebrews asserts that the Son centers the universe. Of course, we are talking about the Son—S-o-n. In the cosmos, the Son is equal in majesty, an image and imprint of the God's very being, the Son was there at the beginning of creation; the Son continues to sustain all that is through his powerful word.

Amidst these celestial considerations, the author of Hebrews thinks of another writer who reflected on the relationship between humanity and divinity, another writer who wondered about relative positions in the universe, a writer who looked at the stars, and felt insignificant. The writer of Hebrews says, "Someone has testified somewhere... 'What are human beings?' What are human beings, in the space of all that has been and is? Who was it that said that? Someone, somewhere..."

The writer Douglas Adams said it in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*—I was reminded of this by one of our Confirmation students on our retreat last weekend. If you are, or have, or have been an adolescent boy, you may be familiar with *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and its many and various sequels. It calls itself a trilogy; it has five books. It is science fiction laced with broad humor, an ancestor to a movie of these last days, *The Guardians of the Galaxy*. I'll admit that I too read the *Hitchhiker* series years ago, and loved it, but I forgot this particular detail about which I'm going to tell you next, a special device that appears in book two, a machine called "The Total Perspective Vortex." (Now you know where today's sermon title came from.) Here's what happens when you are connected to The Total Perspective Vortex: the books says, "When you are put into the Vortex, you are given just one momentary glimpse of the entire unimaginable infinity of creation, and somewhere in it a tiny little marker, a microscopic dot on a microscopic dot, which says, 'You are here.'" (page 72) After you see that, your head explodes.

It's not science fiction that in relation to the galaxy, humans are mind-blowingly small. You don't need a comically made-up machine to tell you that. You only need to look up at the stars. "Someone has testified, somewhere... 'What are human beings?'"

Of course, the someone that the writer of Hebrews refers to is the Psalmist, that's from Psalm 8, the psalm we read together today. The style of Hebrews is a far cry from *The Hitchhiker's Guide...*, but still I always think that this "Someone has testified somewhere..." is a broad inside joke, coming as it does as an introduction to a quotation of scripture which is intentionally and precisely repeated at length.

Long ago, longer ago than the New Testament book of Hebrews, long ago in the Old Testament book of Psalms, God spoke to someone who looked up at the night sky, someone who

knew the moon and the stars in their courses, someone who saw the largeness of the galaxy, and said, “God.” “God, you who have made all of this... you made all of this, and you made humans, and you love them!”

Note the difference in what comes next, note the very different conclusions, in the psalm and the satirical science fiction. For Douglas Adams, an avowed atheist, awareness of one’s relative insignificance equals individual annihilation. But for the mind of faith, for the psalmist, wonder at the universe moves one to praise, to awe, to joyous thanksgiving: “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them? O, Lord our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!”

It moves the writer of Hebrews, too, and the wonder continues into what God does in Christ. This may get a little hidden in the translation we read today, “What are mortals, what are human beings...” The translation we read uses gender-neutral plurals. Now, while I’m all for inclusive language, I also want to point out the magnificent point that the writer of Hebrews makes by quoting Psalm 8 in its singular original: “What is man that you are mindful of him? The Son of Man that you care for him?” Early Christians heard that, and heard a Messianic title, heard and remembered how Jesus referred to himself as The Son of Man. By quoting Psalm 8, the writer of Hebrews makes a Christological point: God the Son, whose glory is greater than anything we can conceive, became a little lower than the angels, became a human being. God did this, in Jesus, because God is mindful of human beings, because God cares for them, because that is how God shows majesty, by sharing all that we experience, even suffering and death. When we look at the night sky, we are filled with wonder, because even bigger than it, is God’s love for us.

We cannot comprehend it. We cannot comprehend how much God loves us. We cannot comprehend what God does, what God is. We cannot see God. But we can see the Son. “We do see Jesus,” as the writer to Hebrews says. We see Jesus welcoming children: toddlers, and second graders, and adolescent boys, and newly teen aged girls. How good it is to welcome so many children today, families who are becoming new members, children given Bibles, books in which we see Jesus, the Son, at the center, at the heart of human life, as we hear at the communion table. We see Jesus, near to those who suffer, beside the sinner, upon the cross. We see Jesus, “who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.”

We continue to learn more about the mysteries of time and space. Salt water was just discovered on Mars! New movies explore, with a scientific precision just this side of fiction, the possibility of human survival on Mars. Even so, for all of our science, with all of our science, we know we are microscopic dots, on a microscopic dot.

Yet another writer, the scientist Carl Sagan, described how very late humanity arrived in the story of the universe. Sagan talked about cosmic history in terms of a one year calendar. In those terms, if the Big Bang occurred on January 1, then the Milky Way formed in early May, and our solar system in early September. At the end of that month, life began stirring on Earth. By November, multi-cellular organisms came into being. December saw the emergence of a sequence of species: plants, insects, fish, dinosaurs, mammals. And humans? Humans appeared sometime in the last minutes before midnight on December 31.” (page 113, *Ask the Beasts* by Elizabeth Johnson.)

I hear that, and think of the book of Hebrews: “In many and various ways God had spoken...but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.”