

# The heavens declare ...

## A sermon on Psalm 19:1–6

H. Henry Janzen

**D**o you ever look up in the black of night and ponder the staggering immensity of the starry expanses? Imagine this: Suppose our colossal sun were shrunk to golf-ball size. On that scale, our homey planet is a mere grain of sand, five meters away. And the nearest star would be some 1,200 kilometers away.<sup>1</sup> And that star is right next door, just four light years away. Most stars are hundreds, thousands—even billions—of light years distant. And they are numberless. The Hubble Space Telescope recently looked deep into space, at a tiny patch of sky covered by a pinhead at arm's length. In that miniscule patch of sky were thousands of galaxies, each with billions of stars.<sup>2</sup>

I contemplate such vastness, and my feeble mind first stutters and flutters, then collapses into a quivering mush. And when it

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reboots, from deep come the questions: What is behind all this? *Who* is behind all this?

Long ago, a poet peered up at these heavens. He saw the same stars, posed the same questions, then said: "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands" (Ps. 19:1).<sup>3</sup> Today, not everyone agrees, it seems. Stephen Hawking, the famous physicist, said: "We are such insignificant creatures on a minor planet of a very average star in the outer suburbs of one of a hundred thousand million galaxies. So it is difficult to believe in a God that would care about us or even notice our existence."<sup>4</sup>

Biologist Jacques Monod offers this dismal outlook: "The ancient covenant is in pieces; man knows at last that he is alone in the universe's unfeeling immensity, out of which he emerged only by chance."<sup>5</sup>

When you survey the heavens, maybe tonight, what do they tell you? And when you clasp a fragrant blossom, tenderly hued beyond any painter's reach; when you hear the wistful cooing of a mourning dove somewhere in the pines; or when in winter you behold your brittle, frozen apple tree, knowing soon it will leap ecstatically to life—what do these declare to you?

These are questions I keep mulling over. Maybe you do, too. I have few final answers—my faith's still too frail, my sight still too dim—but maybe we can reflect on these questions together. And while you ponder, I'll offer, as background verbiage, some musings from my own wrestling with these questions.

### **See the wonder. Feel the awe.**

What do the heavens declare? To answer, maybe first we need to see—really see—them, with eyes alight and hearts alive with wonder. The simplest things, if we but look, have elegance and harmony that take the breath away.

Take, for example, your crusty breakfast toast. Not long ago, its carbon was wafting about in summer breeze as CO<sub>2</sub>, until some leaf of wheat, by light of the sun, snatched it down, trapping it in starch. Soon, now, it will burn in your cells, maybe to fuel this very moment's thought, and then your lungs will set it free again. Once loose, the CO<sub>2</sub> may blow across lands, across oceans, maybe to enter a tropical palm, resting there until the wood decays, then to fly again, ending up perhaps in oriental rice, from which some smiling child will subtly breathe it out again.

**The carbon atoms flit and twirl around the globe in endless dance to the rhythm of the sun. How can you not be amazed at your morning toast, so seamlessly tied to the cadence of life all around?**

And so the carbon atoms flit and twirl around the globe in endless dance to the rhythm of the sun. How can you not be amazed at your morning toast, so seamlessly tied to the cadence of life all around?

“The world is charged with the grandeur of God,” wrote Gerard Manley Hopkins. Do you see it? Do you stop to look, to admire its poetry, to feel its pulse and rhythm? When last did you gaze at a star and exult in its light, knowing you're looking way back in time, perhaps to Menno Simons' day, when the light left that star? When last did you take a bean, dry and dead, plop it in

a pot, and shout in amazement when from its buried husk sprouted a turgid, arching green? And when last did you watch, enthralled, as a newborn's delicate hand curled gently around your finger, and wonder how that perfect supple softness came to be?

Paraphrasing John Donne: All around us every day are ordinary things, which, if they appeared to us only once, would dazzle us, igniting awe and exultation.<sup>6</sup> One biologist, writing about a human cell, said: "People ought to be walking around all day, all through their waking hours, calling to each other in endless wonderment, talking of nothing except that cell."<sup>7</sup>

What has happened to us, that we can shuffle listlessly through the maze of marvels erupting all about us? Where are the poets, the sages, the psalmists to enflame again our wonder? In the flurry of miracles springing, swirling, splashing all around us, how can we sit sullen, even in our churches, dully debating only doctrines and dogmas? Elizabeth Barrett Browning writes:

*Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God:  
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,  
The rest sit round it, and pluck blackberries.<sup>8</sup>*

Only those who *see* take off their shoes, she says. What do the heavens declare? To know, first we need to see the wonder and shrink in humble awe.

### **Listen for the voice of a Creator.**

And then we need to listen for the One *behind* the wonder. In 1 Kings 19, Elijah is waiting for God to pass by. "Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper" (1 Kings 19:11–12).

God is not in the mighty marvels of nature, not in the flaming stars or pastel apple blossom. But when we wait in silent solitary wonder, there sometimes comes to us a gentle whisper.

Some scientists may say: "Give up on a personal God; if there at all, God is some cold, uncaring, mechanical force."<sup>9</sup> *That I am*

not ready to accept; I long not just for a Creator but also for a Redeemer. Most of us do, I think, at least in humble moments.

Chet Raymo, a physicist, tells how his childhood faith, once vibrant, has slowly slipped away. And now, it seems, he mourns its loss. He likens faith to a plover, a stealthy, secret bird, rarely seen, that hides on lonely hillsides, occasionally singing a soft, sighing song faintly in the distance. "I don't know what happened to my plover, but it has certainly flown the coop.... I can't say exactly when it was that the God of my youth took to the upland rains.... One day I woke up and the plover was gone ... and something deep inside me knows that it is gone forever. In the dark hours of the night, in starlight, I listen for the scrawny cry. Is it the wind or the plover there on the hill behind the house?"<sup>10</sup>

We all, I think, yearn for the whisper of a Creator, and more, a Redeemer. "O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer," says the psalmist (Ps. 19:14). I won't say that creation always trumpets God's presence; I won't contend that the wonders we see are proof irrefutable of a God who loves us. For often God is heard in the quietest whisper. "God is polite, knocking only gently," says one physicist, "We have to listen carefully if we are to hear the report."<sup>11</sup>

And so we watch and we listen, awaiting a voice from the stillness, awaiting the warmth of a breath in the quiet cool. And how better to listen than in worshipful hush under starlit sky, or in bewildering prayer over sprouted bean, or in the thrall of an unseen meadowlark's evocative trill. And when the whisper is heard, only one response seems right: to worship. Some forty years ago, Buzz Aldrin stood on the moon. And there, in solemn wonder, he did something not told us then: he celebrated communion.<sup>12</sup> He worshiped.

Can I be honest? I don't always detect the Creator-Redeemer in a starry night; I don't always discern God's voice. And when I do, it may be like faint stirrings of wind in the poplars at night. Was that his voice? Or like the sudden scent of spring-to-be in a January breeze. Was that his breath? But I keep looking, listening, straining to know the one behind the wonder. And when God

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seems near, I am ready, even before I am sure, to bow in awe and humbly to worship.

### **Choose to participate. Choose to believe.**

To know what the heavens declare, first, maybe, we must see the wonder—and then listen for a Redeemer behind the wonder. And third, if we dare, we choose to believe, even *before* the heavens loudly declare.

**Believing is behaving as if it were so. Do I believe there's a Redeemer who longs to enfold me and embrace all creation in eternal harmony? Then I will let that hope imbue my every word, my every touch, and even my sorrow when I fail.**

Alan Sandage, an astronomer, spent decades peering into the heavens, searching its radiant expanses. He too was perplexed by its origins. “I never found the answer in science,” he said. “To stop the divine discomfort, I had to do something... [I] decided to believe.”<sup>13</sup>

That is my response, too. I admit that sometimes, alone beneath the starry, far-flung vastness, I whisper with the psalmist: What am I that you should be mindful of me? (Ps. 8:4). Sometimes to my clouded thoughts

comes by stealth the question: Is faith just an illusion, prompted by my yearnings? Sometimes, even, I clamber up behind a pulpit and I quaver: How certain *am* I of what I now will say? But yet I choose to believe.

Faith is a little like science. The scientist, in probing a question, posits a reasonable answer—a hypothesis—and then scampers to the lab to test it. So it is with faith, except now the laboratory is not some cluttered bench with bubbling tubes and tangled wires. Now the lab is all of life, each moment an experiment. Each joy, each hurt, each jolt of wonderment is data jotted into memories.

Believing is just behaving as if it were so. Do I believe God created heaven and earth? Then I will live assuming it so, caring for what God makes and then pronounces good. Do I believe this life here is not yet the end? Then I will seek to follow more timeless, undying dreams. Do I believe there's a Redeemer who longs to enfold me and embrace all creation in eternal harmony? Then I will let that hope imbue and soften my every word, my every touch, and even my sorrow when so often I fail.

Francis Collins is a geneticist, leader of the Human Genome Project. In his biography, *The Language of God*, he argues persuasively for belief, but what moves him most, it seems, is not mere logic, but the adventure of faith applied. Collins once interrupted his high-flying science to volunteer as doctor in a backwater African clinic. There, despondent, feeling futile in the overwhelming hurt, his hope was revived by a humble farmer, gravely ill. Said the farmer: “I get the sense you are wondering why you came here. I have an answer for you. You came here for one reason. You came here for me.”<sup>14</sup>

Believing is just behaving as if it were true. How can I know a Creator, if I have no part in his creating? Or a Redeemer, if I have no part in his redeeming? Believing is committing, casting our

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pitiful little into the growing wonder unfolding about us. And in this active believing, this experimenting, we will see, soon enough, what the heavens declare.

And the evidence, for me, is so enticing, so reassuring. I traipse through a garden in spring, smell its earth, see it bounding to life, and I detect a Creator’s lingering fragrance. I watch the rhythms of nature—renewing, reviving, re-growing, restoring—and I sense a divine loving hand, intent on redeeming. But most convincing: I look at the piece of creation still most unfinished, most vexing, most bewildering of all: I look at us. I look at

us—fractious, feeble, flawed—and yet, somehow, from this frailty come flashes of goodness deeper than us: a soothing word, an outstretched hand, a forgiving smile, an encouraging nudge, an unmerited mercy. Here now, here among us are wonders, miracles divine, more splendid even than the spiralling galaxies.

I see these glimpses of a Redeemer’s miraculous touch, and hope surging again, I keep on believing. I keep on searching, trying to follow, looking for more marvels and wonders to come.

### **Closing thoughts**

In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, C. S. Lewis tells of a frozen land locked in perpetual winter by a tyrant witch. But as

the children who stumble into this place wander about, one day the ice begins to crack, flashes of green begin to show, a flower pops through here and there. And the children know that Aslan, the Lion Saviour, has come to Narnia and is roaming about.

That also is my sense as I look about creation. Some days this remote little corner of the universe seems a dismal and pitiful place. When bombs erupt and orphans weep and soot obscures the sky, I cringe and cower in despair. But yet I sense something's happening here on this "minor planet of a very average star." Someone, it seems, is roaming about, lifting, restoring, creating, calling—breathing warmth. And isn't it just like him to build something momentous and vast from dust in forgotten corner? Isn't it like him to redeem an extravagant universe, starting with mere insignificants like you and me?

Not long ago, I wandered out into the darkness. The night was cold, the fields barren and bleak. I looked up at the heavens—vast and black, save for the myriad scattered glimmers of light from a thousand glittering suns, so very far away. I felt melancholy, small, alone. And then ... Did I hear, from the silent glimmering heavens, a whisper, eternally old, declaring the glory of God? And did I bow down, in awe, and murmur my thanks?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Similar calculations can be found in various sources, including Werner Gitt, "Incomprehensible Magnitude, Unimaginable Distance," in *The Book of the Cosmos: Imagining the Universe from Heraclitus to Hawking*, ed. Dennis Richard Danielson (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Pub., 2000), 418–22.

<sup>2</sup> Photo and similar explanation appears in many sources; including [http://www.nasa.gov/vision/universe/starsgalaxies/hubble\\_UDF.htm](http://www.nasa.gov/vision/universe/starsgalaxies/hubble_UDF.htm); Terence Dickerson, *The Universe and Beyond*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Buffalo: Firefly Books, Ltd., 2004), 133.

<sup>3</sup> Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Michael White and John R. Gribbon, *Stephen Hawking: A Life in Science* (London: Viking, 1992), 166. White and Gribbon also note, however, that "Hawking ... is not an atheist; he simply finds the idea of faith something he cannot absorb into his view of the Universe."

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Freeman Dyson, *Disturbing the Universe* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 250.

<sup>6</sup> "There is nothing that God hath established in a constant course of nature, and which therefore is done everyday, but would seem a miracle, and exercise our admiration, if it were done but once." From John Donne, "Sermon XX. Preached at St. Paul's upon Easter Day, 1627," *The Works of John Donne: With a Memoir of His Life by Henry Alford* (London: Parker, 1839), 390.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis Thomas, *The Medusa and the Snail: More Notes of a Biology Watcher* (New York: Viking Press, 1979), 156.

<sup>8</sup> From Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, Seventh Book (London: J. Miller, 1864). See <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/barrett/aurora/aurora-7.html>.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Albert Einstein, "Religion and Science," *New York Times Magazine*, November 9, 1930, 1–4; see <http://www.sacred-texts.com/aor/einstein/einsci.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> Chet Raymo, *The Soul of the Night: An Astronomical Pilgrimage* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1985), 55–57.

<sup>11</sup> Gerald L. Schroeder, *The Hidden Face of God: How Science Reveals the Ultimate Truth* (New York: Free Press, 2001), 28.

<sup>12</sup> See Francis Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 160; see also [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buzz\\_Aldrin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buzz_Aldrin).

<sup>13</sup> Quoted by Edward J. Larson and Larry Witham, "Scientists and Religion in America," *Scientific American*, September 1999, 89.

<sup>14</sup> Collins, *The Language of God*, 217.

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