

Nothing Routine

(About the Wonder of Advent's Love)

*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
(Psalm 8:3-4)*

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the Second Sunday of Advent, **December 10, 2017**
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Last Sunday I launched an Advent series I'm calling *Nothing Routine*. We remembered the Apollo missions, focusing on the pre-launch news conference for Apollo 13. When a reporter asked if Apollo adventures hadn't become rather routine, Commander Jim Lovell leaned into the microphone to say, "*I assure you, there's Nothing Routine about a trip to the moon!*"

I suggested that Hebrews 10:5 takes us to the pre-launch moment of the divine ADVENT-ure. "*When Christ came into the world, he said . . . sacrifices and offerings you did not desire, but a body you have prepared for me.*" It sounds to me very similar to the *Nothing Routine* statement of Commander Lovell, Hebrews calling Jesus the "*Commander of our Salvation.*" As God embarked on this redemptive mission he speaks of a body prepared for him. Last Sunday, then, we saw there is *Nothing Routine about the Scope of Advent's Mission*, redemption accomplished and applied through the sacrifice of the Son of God.

If last week we journeyed to the moon, this morning the words of the psalmist will lead us to the beyond the moon to the stars. "*When I look to the heavens, the moon and the stars you have ordained, what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?*" The singer was filled with awe that in a universe so vast the Creator could care for him. So we learn as we dance among the stars, there is *Nothing Routine about the Wonder of Advent's Love*.

One of the most famous photographs in human history is the first photo of earth taken from the vicinity of the moon, taken by Lunar Orbiter 1 on August 23, 1966. The earth was seen as a blue planet, an orb without divisions of nations, territories, and cultures. The image shows us to be one, but also to be fragile. It is humbling. From the moon, we are so small. Today, leaving the moon and reaching the stars, the earth and everything on it grows yet smaller and smaller.



A recurring theme of the comic strip *Peanuts* is Charlie Brown's baseball team. He, of course, is always on the pitcher's mound. Lucy is his right fielder, missing every fly ball hit her way, often being bonked on the head by the ball, once even setting a record for "*consecutive bonks*" in a single game! Lucy's excuses are classic. "*I was having my quiet time,*" she might say or, my favorite, (especially appropriate for this message) "*The moons of Saturn were in my eyes.*"

Lucy's disinterest in the game is seen in her trivial conversations with the intense Charlie Brown. In one, Lucy, harmlessly tucked away in distant right field, manages to get the pitcher's attention. "*Hey manager!*" Lucy yells. "*Ask your catcher if he still loves me.*" Lucy, you see, just adores Schroeder. Charlie Brown sighs, but reluctantly heeds the request of his teammate. Rotating toward home plate he calls to Schroeder, "*Lucy wants to know if you still love her.*"

Swiveling again to face the outfield, Charlie Brown calls out, "*He says . . . No!*" The remote loneliness of right field obscurity doesn't deter Lucy. "*Why not?*" she objects. Charlie Brown sighs in disappointment that his mediation is not yet complete, and pivots back toward home plate. Receiving the catcher's answer he spins around again to face the outfield and yells back to Lucy, "*He says there are so many reasons, he can't remember them all.*"

Lucy, deeply upset, yells back to Charlie Brown, "*Really? That's very depressing.*"

Charlie Brown, exasperated, cries out, "*Do you mind if we get on with the game?*"

Lucy looks up, startled. "*Game? What game?*"

"*The baseball game!*" says Charlie Brown.

Looking down, Lucy murmurs. "*Oh, that's right. I was wondering why I was standing out here.*"

"*I was wondering why I was standing out here*" is a good question many of the seven billion residents of Planet Earth have asked. Science has shown the universe to be, as Carl Sagan wrote, "*a cosmic ocean vast beyond our most courageous imaginings.*" In the past 500 years our little blue planet has been nudged more and more into the obscure loneliness of the universe's distant right field as we've learned that earth is but a minuscule spot in a colossal creation. Like Lucy, we ponder, "*What are we doing here? What is our purpose out here, after all?*" It's the ancient question of the psalmist grappling with how the Creator could be mindful of humanity.

The question is often phrased differently in our scientific age. "*Do we have any meaning beyond the blind chance of mechanistic evolution?*" Advent invites our souls to *Wonder* that God could "*so love the world that he would send his only begotten Son.*"

Let's consider another New Testament passage describing God's decision to embark upon a redemptive mission to earth. Philippians 2 takes us to the beginning of the drama of redemption as God "*empties*" himself to become a babe in Bethlehem, thus to join our human journey. "*Though he thought it not robbery to be equal with God, he emptied himself to be born in human likeness, and humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, so that at the name of*

Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven and earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” The passage is hymnic in composition, not merely praising God for the self-emptying launch of this redemption, but admonishing Christians to be like-minded in the giving of themselves. Doing this, Paul says (2:15), you will “*shine like stars in the world.*”

Pilgrims in Bethlehem bend low just to enter the Church of the Nativity (established in 325 A. D.) and look down intently as they inch their way down slim steps from the church to the grotto, the cave where the birth of Jesus has been remembered by pilgrims from ancient times. I’ve always thought it odd that at the church where we celebrate the birth of Jesus we have to keep our eyes pointed down, when in the bible story the shepherds were looking up at the angel announcing the birth of Jesus. We, too, will look down at the manger on Christmas, but before we look down, let’s look up with the psalmist to ask, “*How could God love us, we who are but a cohesion of dust particles? Are we, then, More? Is there a higher origin to our being?*”

The psalmist pitted our smallness against the vastness of the universe. We understand. As scientific knowledge has progressed our human claim to uniqueness has necessarily diminished. Science has relegated our little planet, this “*pale blue dot,*” more and more to the remote outfield of the cosmic ballgame. By the measure of time and space we are insignificant, so much so that, like Lucy, our questions of love and life seem petty as they endlessly swirl around us. Like Lucy, are we craving love from someone too distant to care?

Mark Twain argued against humans thinking too much of our species. “*Don’t expect too much of human beings,*” he wrote. “*We were created at the end of the week, when God was tired and looking forward to a day off.*” He was pointing out that for much of human history mankind assumed earth to be on the pitcher’s mound of the universe. Science has progressively moved us away from the mound — to the infield, to the outfield, to the bleachers, to the parking lot, and far beyond – away from center stage and the pre-scientific assumptions of a geo-centric cosmos in which Planet Earth alone was Terra Firma.

When 15th and 16th century astronomers like Copernicus and Kepler proposed a helio-centric arrangement of the cosmos, this new understanding was unwelcome. Galileo, on trial in 1633, was forced to recant his position that the earth orbits the sun, to affirm in trial that the earth is unmoving. He would famously say as he was escorted from house arrest, *Eppur, si muove* (*And yet, it moves.*)

Some felt, then and now, that science unbridled by religion would rip apart the fabric of our faith. What exciting times in which we live, as science and religion create arenas of dialogue, both learning that for either science or religion to feel threatened by the other is a condescension truly breathtaking. Science is learning its need of philosophy and spirit to navigate new technological territory so that our knowledge doesn’t destroy us, and religion knows well its need to appreciate scientific inquiry in full recognition that science is changing human life in unparalleled and beneficial ways, but also in potentially harmful ways.

Back to the ballgame! If the sun had been called in from the bullpen to become the new center of the cosmos, it would not stay on the mound for long. Soon it was the sun’s turn to head out into right field, shown to be a humdrum star lost between two outer spiral arms of the Milky

Way, one of the millions of galaxies. Our sun is eight light minutes from earth, 90 million miles, which positions Earth comfortably in what may be called the Goldilock's Zone, warm enough for liquid water but not so hot as to preclude life. Eight minutes this light travels, so that the light pouring through this stained glass set out on its journey a mere eight minutes ago. Amazing, that! But far more amazing than that is this, this knowing of that. The ability to ponder and to wonder marks homo sapien as unique.

The next closest star systems, Alpha Centauri and Proxima Centauri, are over four light years away. If one of those stars blew up today, a nova event, you will have aged four years before the light of the explosion reaches us, and those are our nearest neighbors among the stars, stuck out in right field with us! Space telescopes like the famed Hubble, carried into orbit in 1990, take pictures of light having crossed enormous interstellar distances, setting out on its journey long, long before Jesus was born in Bethlehem, thousands and millions of light years distant.

Only a few months ago, from August 22 to August 28, the Hubble telescope witnessed what is called a kilonova, the collision of two neutron stars. In the night following the initial discovery a fleet of telescopes started their hunt to locate the source of the event, finding it about 130 million light-years distant. A point of light was shining where nothing had been visible before and this set off one of the largest multi-telescope observing campaigns ever. *"It's part of the cycle of life and death in the universe,"* says Peter Michelson, a Stanford physicist. *"You and I are made of the stuff that came from a supernova."*

Leonard Sweet wrote, *"What makes blood red? Hemoglobin. What makes hemoglobin? Iron. Where do we get iron? Only from the stars . . . made in a supernova. In other words, we do not have an atom in our bodies that isn't the product of some dead star. God made us from the dust of the ground, Genesis declares, but it must have been Stardust, the swirling stuff of exploding gas and dust flung into interstellar space as a dying star's core collapses . . . If we can look at the vastness of the universe and see within it the design and handiwork of God's eternal plan for our redemption, then we can joyfully claim our Stardust heritage."*

So perhaps Paul said more than he knew when he wrote, *"You shine like stars in the world."* Made of star stuff, we really do shine as stars! That's cause for *Wonder*. While we may occupy but a tiny place in the vast ocean of the cosmos, we occupy a colossal place in God's heart, the vastness of whose love exceeds our most courageous imaginings.

Sue Monk Kidd tells about her daughter having the part of the Bethlehem Star in her church's Christmas play. Her child burst through the door with her costume after the play's first rehearsal, a five pointed star lined in shiny gold tinsel designed to drape over her like a sandwich board. Sue smiled at the sight and asked, *"What exactly will you be doing in the Christmas play?"* Sue wanted to know if she had a speaking part.

Her little girl beamed and said, *"Mommy, I just stand there and shine!"* Filled with the growing light of Advent, as Stardust, let us *"shine like stars in the world."*