

“Creation’s Song, part 5: Cosmos”
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
on September 13th 2015 (16th Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Genesis 1: 14-19
Psalm 19: 1-6

There is a sense, I think...a sense in which it could rightly be said that the “real” work of creation is finished by the end of the third day: by which I mean the work of laying the foundation of all that ever was and ever will be. After all, by the end of day three, God has not only illumined the chaos (the work of day one), not only created the great expanse we call the sky (the work of day two) but most impressively, has both created and greened the earth. The basic structure is all there...the basic building blocks are all available...in short, where there had once been nothing, now there is something quite substantial to take its place. Three days in...but so much, so very much has already been accomplished!

And, you know: the very structure of the next three days—days 4, 5, and 6—make it clear that the Biblical writers understood that the work accomplished on those subsequent days, could be viewed as an echo of the first three. And so, day 6—the day that echoes day 3 when God created the green earth—we’ll discover that day 6 is when God fills the green earth with animals of every conceivable variety and assortment. And so, day 5—the day that echoes day 2 when God separates the waters above from the waters below—we’ll discover that day 5 is the day on which God fills the oceans with fish and the sky with birds. And so on day 4—the day we are to ponder this morning...

...on day 4—the day that echoes day 1 when God said *let there be light*—on day 4 God echoes day 1 by placing lights in the heavens: the greater light (we call it the sun), the lesser light (we call it the moon) as well as the tiny lights we call stars. In effect, what God does on day 4 is take a generalized light, a light that is everywhere at all times, and translates it into a form appropriate to life on earth by putting into place heavenly bodies—sun, moon and stars—so that these heavenly bodies can mediate the light for earth’s creatures.

Central to that is light itself. Presumably, by the end of the first day, God has all of the light God requires. As the Psalmist so memorably puts it: *even the darkness is not dark to you, [O God,] the night is as bright as day, for darkness is as light to you.* But imagine...imagine for a minute...how oppressive we frail human beings would find it, were we to live in a world in which the darkness never came: a world that was bright! bright! bright! every moment of every day. There is a sense, you see, in which we would be blinded by that sort of never ending light: a light which over time would become almost as pitiless as a world that was always in the dark. God is not the one who requires sun, moon and

stars to mediate the light of day 1: children of flesh, blood and bone: **we** are the ones who require that mediation.

Much the same can be said of the gift of time: time which, according to the Biblical account, also begins on the first day when we are told that *there was evening, and there was morning, the first day*. According to Genesis—and according to at least some big-bang theorists--time begins with the first day of creation. From the perspective of the Biblical account, however, what we ought to notice is that the creation of time on day 1 is much like the creation of light on day 1: both are real to God the Creator, requiring no mediation by any other object. For human beings, however, who seek to keep track of time—who need to track the changing of the seasons, who need to be cognizant of the passing of days and years—we would be incapable of tracking shifts in time had God stopped with the third day of creation, failing to create those heavenly bodies that mediate time for us, no less surely than they mediate for us the light.

And it goes without saying...although it does need to be said...it goes without saying that I am playing at the edges of the very thing I played with last Sunday, namely adopting a suspiciously anthropomorphic, a suspiciously human centered worldview: a worldview that places human beings at the centre of creation. Recall that last week I described the work of day three, especially the work of greening the earth, as the work of setting the table, setting the table for the hungry creatures that were soon to follow. And this morning...this morning...I am describing the creation of sun, moon and stars as God's way of mediating the gifts of unmediated light and time in a way that makes those gifts available to human beings. Once again: we are succumbing (at any rate, I am succumbing) to the temptation of placing humanity front and centre...the problem being...the problem being that to rule that temptation out of bounds is, I believe, to rule out of bounds the very thing that makes the Biblical account so powerful and so distinctive. Distinctive! Distinctive from both the ancient creation myths of ancient Israel's neighbours! Distinctive as well, from the modern scientific account! Both...both deserve further comment.

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Lest we forget: the nations surrounding ancient Israel tended to treat the planets, including the sun, moon and stars, as divinities, as gods: a notion we find even in such sophisticated cultures as those of ancient Greece and Rome. As part of their adaption of those ancient beliefs, the Biblical writers certainly did not do what modern science has taught us to do, namely treat sun, moon and stars as lifeless objects. For the Biblical writers the sun, moon and stars are creatures: creatures no less alive than a human creature, no less alive than a lion, a tiger, or a bear: oh my! Living creatures...but not, most definitely not gods! Not to be worshipped! Not to be bowed down to! Indeed: while we know that Joseph's brothers were offended by his dream—the one in which sun, moon and stars bow down to Joseph—while we know his brothers hated him for that

dream, the thing, say, a Priest in the court of the Pharaoh might have found offensive is the fact that it is the sun, the moon and the stars, divinities!, gods!, who are bowing down to this mere human being! And while the psalmist has no trouble depicting the sun as a bridegroom getting ready to run its race, there is never any question, from the Bible's perspective, as to which of God's creatures truly come closest to resembling the Creator.

*When I look at your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars you have established,
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honour.*

Depending upon your point of view, of course, that may sound outrageous! But it is very much the point of view—the worldview if you please—of Biblical faith, a faith that stands in stark contrast to so much of the prevailing worldview at the time our scriptures were taking shape, a worldview in which human beings often turned out to be little more than playthings of the gods! By contrast, scripture names us as little lower than God! Wow!

Let's not, however, ignore the fact that the contrast between biblical faith and our own era's scientific worldview tends to be equally sharp. Unlike the ancient myths, of course, we have no business dismissing the findings of modern science as mere superstition. God forbid! While we should not give an uncritical pass to all of the things science now permits us to do, some of which raise profound ethical questions, it would be folly to be dismissive of the world of wonder modern science, modern astronomy, has opened for us. But we are surely kidding ourselves if we pretend that the world thereby opened is one in which we feel especially at home. The numbers, in and of themselves, are staggering. How do we begin to make sense of a universe, the **visible** part of which has a diameter of 91 billion light-years? How do we begin to comprehend a world in which so-called dark-matter and dark-energy appear to play as decisive a role as so-called ordinary matter and ordinary energy? How do we even begin to wrap our heads around a universe that is thought to include (in its **visible** sections) 170 billion galaxies? And yes, how do we even begin to make sense of the fact that our own galaxy—which less than a hundred years ago was thought to be the only galaxy but is now known to share the universe with 170 billion other galaxies!—how do we fathom the fact that our own Milky Way is now believed to contain, at a bare minimum, 100 million stars and 100 billion planets? What do we do with any of that?

I am reminded...reminded of a few lines from one of Joni Mitchell's most haunting songs, a song that captures the sense of being lost in a vast universe with which so many of us live.

*So I sent up my prayer,
wondering where it had to go.
With heaven full of astronauts,
and the Lord on death row.*

Where indeed? Where indeed do our prayers have to go, against the backdrop of a universe, the very contours of which, stagger the mind?

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Well. There's a key word...a key word...in the Genesis account of day four. A word easily overlooked...but a word the importance of which cannot be overestimated. *And God said: "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and for years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth."* And the word I have in mind here is the first in the sequence describing the function of the heavenly lights, namely that they would be—first and foremost **signs**: not merely placed *for seasons and for days and for years*, not merely placed *to give light upon the earth*, but placed above all as **signs**. And it's important to note that the sort of sign indicated here—despite the fact that the Bible acknowledges that the Magi, the wise-men were astrologers—the signs of which Genesis speaks has nothing to do with astrology. Think rather of the way in which John's Gospel continually refers to the miracles of Jesus as signs: arrow-like signs that indicate Jesus as the One sent by God. In much the same way, the sun, moon and stars are offered to us not only for the practical help they provide, but as a sign of the majesty and graciousness of the Creator.

And, of course, none of that can be proven! Let that sink in for a moment. None of that...not a jot of that...can be demonstrated in any way whatsoever! So much breath has been wasted...so much pointless ink has been spilled...especially over the last couple of decades...through which scientific owls try to use their science to demonstrate the wrong-headedness of the Biblical perspective...and Christian owls return the favour by trying to demonstrate that the scientific owls are wrong. And all of it...every jot of it...tends to miss the basic point, namely that religion and science deal with two entirely different fields of enquiry, neither capable of disproving the other. The point being...the point being that a life of faith is a life lived **in faith**...meaning that a life of faith begins not with the **demonstration** of an undeniable fact, but with a **decision**: the decision to embrace the countless signs that God has placed before us, to embrace them not as mere things, not as mere objects, but as **signs**, as a never ending series of pointers, pointers to the boundless power and tender mercies of the One who brought us into being. And here's the thing!

Given...given what we now know about the contours of the cosmos in which we live—the shape and size of the universe in which we have been placed—the decision to place our trust in the signs of God’s love, to place our trust in the reality of God’s love, is a decision that for many of us will likely need to be continually renewed: to be reaffirmed new every morning! Choosing... choosing to live this day as one filled with God-endowed purpose and meaning! Choosing...choosing to live this day with the conviction that the light that illumines our path is nothing less than the light of the Creator’s love! Above all, choosing...choosing to live this day as those who seek to walk by that light: so that in God’s good time we might be transformed fully into children of the light: our every thought, our every word, our every deed, worthy of the light that came to us in Jesus. God’s ultimate pointer, God’s ultimate sign, of the love in which the whole cosmos...this mind-numbingly vast creation...was held from its first beginnings...will continue to be held until the end of time.

May it be so! In Christ’s blessed name! Amen!