

“Why Bother?”

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum

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O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. ² Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger. ³ When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; ⁴ what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

⁵ Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. ⁶ You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, ⁷ all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, ⁸ the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

⁹ O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! (Psalm 8)

The Apollo 8 mission, which spent the Christmas of 1968 in space, was the first human spaceflight to reach and orbit the Moon. The crew of Frank Borman, William Anders, and James Lovell orbited the Moon ten times, and on the back end of the first trip around they also became the first humans to witness an “Earthrise,” the sensation of watching the Earth appear to rise up from the grey lunar landscape. Bill Anders, who captured the view in one of the most famous photographs of the 20th century, remembers well the deep emotion of those moments. The Earth, he said, “was the only color we could see in the universe.” And his next thought was this: “We’re living on a tiny little dust mote in left field on a rather insignificant galaxy. And basically this is it for humans.”¹

Jim Lovell had a similar reaction. “We came around the moon for the very first time,” he later remembered, “and Frank and I were looking ahead as the horizon passed us and all of a sudden, we saw the earth come out of a lunar horizon; and that was really a significant sight for me because I could put my thumb up to the window of the spacecraft and completely hide the earth. I realized that everything I had ever known -- my home, my loved ones, everything that was there that I had known about -- is behind my thumb. I realized at that time just how insignificant we are in the universe”²... “and how fragile we are.”³

Although the faithful Israelite who wrote Psalm 8 was looking up from the Earth instead of down onto it, their psalm is remarkably similar in the awe and wonder it describes. “*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established,*” the poet writes, I cannot help but wonder to God, “*what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?*” The universe is so vast

¹ “Mankind’s rarest view: Earth from afar,” http://www.nbcnews.com/id/18202449/ns/technology_and_science-space/t/mankinds-rarest-view-earth-afar/#.WTaycfnyvX4

² “View is out of this world,” Associated Press, <https://www.presstelegram.com/2007/04/20/view-is-out-of-this-world/>, published April 20, 2007, updated September 1, 2017.

³ “Mankind’s rarest view...”



and complex – it is difficult to comprehend the power and wisdom of the One who created it... and it is relatively easy to see how small, insignificant, even irrelevant we can feel in comparison to such creative divine power.

It is even more puzzling when we consider what a mess we tend to make of things. From space, astronauts often comment about how peaceful, clean, and beautiful our planet looks from afar – which is particularly striking to them, given that our experiences on the ground are so often the opposite -- conflicted, messy, and ugly. As Iranian-American space traveler Anousheh Ansari observed, “If people [could] see Earth from up here, see it without those borders, see it without any differences in race or religion, they would have a completely different perspective. Because when you see it from that angle, you cannot think of your home or your country. All you can see is one Earth....”⁴

Given the miraculous scale of the universe... given how insignificant we can feel in it... and given the mess we so often make of things... we might well wonder why God pays us any attention at all? Why does God even bother with us?

This question, asked by a psalmist thousands of years ago, is the puzzle that the respected scholar and rabbi Joshua ben Levi wanted to try and solve back in the Third Century. He did it with what we now call “midrash.” Simply put, midrash is the Jewish tradition of using stories to help illuminate a biblical passage or explain something in scripture that is difficult to understand. If those stories were helpful or caught on, they would become legends that were passed on from generation to generation. Consider how the story of the hatchet and the cherry tree became part of American folklore, and deepened the legend around George Washington’s honesty and character. Well, about 1,700 years ago, Joshua ben Levi wanted to help his students have a better understanding of Psalm 8, so he told them this story about the prophet Moses...

Moses had just gone up onto Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. As the Bible says, he was surrounded by a heavenly cloud, which represented the power and presence of God. The idea was that Moses, in these moments, was on truly holy ground – in fact, he was getting as close to God as anyone had ever been. And the angels who ministered to God around the throne did not like it one bit. They did not think any human should be allowed to get so close to God’s holiness, and they certainly did not understand why God was even bothering with this nobody named Moses. “Master of the Universe,” they said to God, “what is this child of woman doing among us?”

“He has come to receive the Torah,” God answered. But that did little to change the mind of the angels. “Do you mean to give the treasure of the Torah -- that was kept stored away for nine hundred and seventy years, and for four generations before the creation of the universe -- to a creature of flesh and blood?”

Instead of answering them directly, God turned to Moses. “You give them an answer,” God said. “Provide them with a rebuttal.”

Moses probably realized about now that he was in way over his head. But he figured he would do his best. His first words were back to God: “Master of the Universe, this Torah that You will give me—what is written in it?”

“Do not make for yourself other gods,” the Lord replied.

Moses then turned to the angels. “Well, do you angels dwell among foreign nations that worship idols? Would this commandment be relevant to you?”

⁴ “View is out of this world...”

The angels said nothing, so Moses turned to God again. "What else is written in it?" "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy," God replied.

Addressing the heavenly host, Moses asked "Do you angels perform labor, that you require rest?"

This continued commandment by commandment, with Moses artfully making the point that the angels had no need of the Torah, because they did not have the same worries or weaknesses that humans did. As citizens of heaven, they did not have to worry about taking oaths or telling lies. Cloaked in the presence of God, they didn't have to work through what it meant to honor a mother or father... they had no reason to covet... they were not tempted by envy, adultery, or theft. "Is there any rivalry among you," Moses asked. "Is the impulse to evil within you?"

That rhetorical question won the angels over. Moses helped them see that humanity, flawed though it may be, would be a key part of the story of God... that even lowly human beings might be capable of reflecting the best of God's wisdom and majesty. And they embraced Moses as well, each of them giving the prophet a special token of power or understanding to mark their heavenly favor.

It is a strange and mystical story, but perhaps the situation demands a strange and mystical story, because only a strange and mystical story could help explain the strange and mystical irony of Psalm 8 – the idea that we, as broken vessels made of clay, would get any attention at all from the Sovereign Creator of the cosmos, let alone be given honor and prestige in the eyes of God. True, we are no angels, but for some reason God considers us just a little bit below them. We tend to make a mess of things here on earth, but God still opens the gates of heaven to us. Even though we struggle to understand why, God has big plans for us, because God is convinced that we can be more, that we can be better. To quote the words of God spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, "*For surely I know the plans I have for you... plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.*"⁵

I remember well that, when I held both of our daughters for the first time after they were born, I was entranced with their hands. Their fingers were so tiny, but they were perfectly formed. They were like adult hands, but in miniature. All the features were there – little creases on the joints, tiny little fingernails – all in the same proportions as adult hands, just much, much smaller... but not only that... they were fresh, pristine, new, unblemished, without the scars of life. They were so little, so helpless, so fragile... but at the same time they were miraculous, majestic, and somehow perfect. And as I held their little hands in mine, I was as close as I have ever been to understanding this mystical puzzle of how we can be, at the very same time, so tiny in the scope of the universe and so cherished by the One who created it all.

It is also the closest I have ever come to experiencing what astronauts now call the "overview effect." Those few lucky people who, like Jim Lovell, were given a seat where they could hide the entirety of Earth behind the end of their thumb, are overcome with a new perspective on life and living. They experience a mystical, transformative, cognitive shift that gives them new eyes to see the great potential of humanity and also the dire need for humanity to do better with what we have been given. Overcome with the beauty of our planetary home, they feel a heightened sense of connection to one another and our

⁵ Jeremiah 29:11.

common connections to God.⁶ Like Moses on Sinai, they were given the chance to be lifted up from and beyond the limitations of this Earth – or, to quote the famous poem, they

*“slipped the surly bonds of Earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward [they] climbed,
and joined the tumbling mirth of sun-split clouds—
and done a hundred things You have not dreamed of—
wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence...
Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue
[they] topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace,
Where never lark nor ever eagle flew—
And, while with silent lifting mind [they] trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out [their] hand, and touched the face of God.”⁷*

Although we have never stood in the cloud at the summit of Sinai, or had a seat in an orbiting capsule, the mysterious gift of Psalm 8 is made to us just as fully. When we look up at the vastness of the night sky, and wonder why in the world God even bothers with us, we can be assured that we are indeed precious in God’s sight... that the very hairs on our heads and the fingers on our hands are touched by the living God... and that somehow, in the eyes of heaven, we have been lifted up to a place that is just a shade lower than God’s own self.

And if we ever are ever vexed by the challenges that face us... from the wars that plague the world all the way down to problems in our own homes... if we are ever tempted to look at the mountains we are given to climb and say, “Why Bother?” ... then may the unmerited love and status that God has given us inspire us to try once more to be better, and to do better, so that we too may slip the surly bonds of Earth and touch the face of God.

Amen.

⁶ “Overview effect,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Overview_effect

⁷ “High Flight,” by John Gillespie Magee, Jr., <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/157986/high-flight-627d3cfb1e9b7>