
The Heavens Declare the Glory of God

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A Sermon at The Cathedral of St. Philip

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Photo from Hubble

The heavens declare the glory of God,
 And the firmament shows his handiwork.
One day tells its tale to another,
 And one night imparts knowledge to another.
Although they have no words or language,
 And their voices are not heard,
Their sound has gone out into all lands,
 And their message to the ends of the world.

-Psalm 19:1-4

The heavens declare the glory of God.

At one time in human history, religion and science were faithful partners.

Nicholas Copernicus, who published the idea that the sun was at the center of the solar system, was also a Canon at Frauenberg Cathedral. Johannes Kepler, the first true astrophysicist, who realized that orbits are elliptical, originally wanted to be a Lutheran minister; he wrote in 1595, "for a long time I wanted to become a theologian, now, however, behold how through my efforts God is being debated in astronomy."

Isaac Newton, whose theology was unorthodox and erratic, nevertheless actually wanted his science to convince people of the existence of God. Robert Grosseteste, whose work in optics laid out the basis of the western scientific tradition, and which prepared the way for Galileo's telescope, was a bishop, the Anglican Bishop of Lincoln. Roger Bacon, who championed experiment and scientific method, was a Franciscan monk.

These early heroes of science did not find that their religion contradicted their pursuit of scientific truth. And much scientific pursuit had its origin in observing and studying the heavens. The sky, especially the night sky, displayed movement that looked orderly but also could not be exactly quantified. Which heavenly bodies moved around what?

I believe that even Albert Einstein had a deep spiritual streak, even a mystical streak. Even in his time, the orbits of the planets could not be exactly quantified or predicted. It is said that Einstein first tested his theory of relativity in 1915 by applying it to the orbit of the tiny planet Mercury. Lo and behold, he found that his theory explained the discrepancy in relation to Newtonian theory. His biographer, Abram Pais, said, "This discovery was, by far the strongest emotional experience in Einstein's scientific life. Nature had spoken to him." (Jonathan Polkinghorne, *Belief in God in An Age of Science*, New Haven: Yale University, 1998, page 3.)

The heavens declare the glory of God.

I celebrate this morning the language of God. It is not just in words that God speaks to us. God speaks through the language of math and science. God speaks through the heavens; God speaks through the earth.

Some of our great poets know this: "The earth is charged with the grandeur of God," said Gerard Manley Hopkins. And I will always love these sweet lines of Elizabeth Barrett Browning,

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
And only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.

Only he who sees takes off his shoes.

I was actually wearing shoes last week, running shoes. I was doing my morning jog, trying to exercise off the weight I gained at the end of the summer. During those jogs, I am accustomed to dodging various hazards in the road and on the sidewalk. You know what the hazards are. Suddenly, right below, my feet were dodging a fallen butterfly. I don't know much about butterflies, but it was some sort of swallowtail. I stopped and examined its beauty. My mere act of pausing to observe it made me aware of so much more life—divine life—all around me.

Later that day, I saw the most recent photographs from our repaired Hubble telescope, whose lenses are trained on galaxies far, far away. One of the most dramatic photographs was of the Butterfly Nebula (there are actually two nebulae that are sometimes called the Butterfly Nebula; this one was NGC 6302). I knew that the God who created that delicate butterfly on the sidewalk of Atlanta is the same God who created that exploding Butterfly Nebula so many light years above us.

The heavens declare the glory of God—that is, if we pay attention. There is no contradiction between the language of God in words and the language of God in science.

The medieval scholars considered that there were two divine books. One was the book of scripture. The other was the book of nature. They knew that there is something in God's creation that speaks to us of God. It was one of my heroes, St. Anselm, who named the strategy of "Faith Seeking Understanding," "fides quarens intellectam" as a principle for the relationship between faith and reason. Reason and faith and not meant to oppose each other. Rather, it is faith that inspires us to use reason to its fullest extent.

All truth, no matter where it comes from, is God's truth. This principle is what enabled great thinkers to investigate the stars and the seas, to boldly go where no one has gone before—not just in space, but in medicine, in physics, in biology, chemistry, history and archaeology. All truth is God's truth.

The person of faith, then, is not the idiot fanatic who cringes away from science and investigation. The person of faith is

the scientist who leans forward into discovery and exploration.

There is a certain principle, a certain discipline, which lies at the heart of both spirituality and science. It is the discipline of paying attention. The discipline of observation.

Good science is about good observation, paying attention to things. I believe that discipline is also at the heart of good spirituality. "Watch," says Jesus over and over again toward the end of his ministry. Pay attention. Give heed. The great mystics of prayer and contemplation say the same thing: prayer is about paying attention. When we pay attention to life, we begin to recognize the presence of God in life, in all life.

Psalm 19 ends just as gloriously as it begins. It begins with "the heavens declare the glory of God." The entire universe. The entire created order. The universe roars with the presence of God! But the psalm ends much more intimately, more quietly with these words:

"Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer."

The glory is that God is not only in the heavens. The glory of God is also inside each one of us. The God who speaks through the universe is also the God who speaks to each of us in the meditation of our hearts. (This is the feature of divinity that Richard Dawkins, writing in *The Wall Street Journal* on September 12, 2009, does not understand.) The God who is awesome and glorious, is also the God who is intimate and close "as close to each one of us as our own heart is.

If we pay attention. If we watch, if we listen, then God is within the intricate process of our own bodies just as gloriously as he is in the heavens. God is in the Butterfly Nebula, and God is also in the butterfly dancing in Atlanta. God is in the joyous explosions of our individual hearts, and God is also in the nervous butterflies of our guts!

In our time, much nonsense competes for our attention. Vanity and violence allure us to television and movie screens, and cell phone screens. We glorify too much empty thought, too many offenses in our time. Psalm 19 calls us back to the law of the Lord, too, that which will revive the soul.

Where are you directing your attention today? What are you spending your time doing? If you are paying attention to something life-giving and wholesome and beautiful and good, you are listening to God. Look to the heavens. Look to the meditation of our own hearts. The heavens declare the glory of God, whether those heavens are above us are inside us.

AMEN.

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