

## God-Sized Faith

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“The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament  
proclaims his handiwork.” -- Psalm 19:1

Although he swore he never actually used the phrase, “Billions and billions,” the late Carl Sagan comes to many of our minds when we hear those words.

Sagan was a Cornell astronomy professor and popularizer of basic science for millions of us in the 1980s. Wearing his trademark turtleneck and sports jacket, Sagan distilled the math and science of astrophysics into a popular series of books and an award-winning program on PBS called *Cosmos*, which was one of the most widely watched series in the history of public television.

In those days, talking about billions of planets or billions of miles or billions of years or billions of anything was still a big deal – Google hadn’t yet made large numbers commonplace – and Sagan was genuinely in awe of the scale of the known universe. His peculiarly explosive pronunciation of the b in “billions” was an unconscious attempt on his part to convey his scientific passion to his television audience. Just the other day, the crossword puzzle included a quote of his which said, “Understanding is a kind of ecstasy,” and for a world as big as Sagan’s, there was a lot to understand.

The Bible has no word for billions, but Psalm 19 is an ancient sage’s attempt to convey to those of us who sleepwalk through life some of his excitement about what the natural world has to tell us. Unlike Carl Sagan, who professed to be an awe-struck agnostic, the anonymous author of Psalm 19 was a firm believer not in creation itself, but rather in the creator behind creation. For the writer of Psalm 19, there was no spontaneous generation or big bang; all of that stuff contained in the heavens came from somewhere or someone, and that someone, for the psalmist, was God.

I agree with that view, and I assume most of you do as well, which is why you’re here this morning. I’m here because you pay me to be here, but you’re here because you believe in God, and I suspect that the God that most of you believe in is some version of the God of Psalm 19, whose glory is told by the heavens and whose still-speaking voice is heard without words.

This is what we might call “Big God” religion, which sees God, as the psalmist saw God, in the big reality we call creation. This is God writ large on the very largest of canvasses. The very first words of Psalm 19 announce that we’re talking about big religion because it says “The heavens” -- plural -- “the heavens are telling the glory of God,” and it doesn’t use the word we would normally use, which is heaven, singular, and there’s a difference. The theological concept of heaven and the cosmological concept of the heavens are not the same, and their first difference is a difference of scale: heaven is a much smaller reality than the heavens, and that’s the first lesson we need to take from Psalm 19.

Heaven, for many of us, is that imaginary cozy place where, after we die, we get to spend eternity with God and the people we like. The people we don’t like are either in hell or they’re in some distant wing of our Father’s house, presumably near the ice

machine or the elevator. This is theological heaven, and it's distinct from cosmological heaven in that it's part of that system of rewards and punishments that we religious people have been so fond of across the ages. We good people get the reward of heaven, while those bad people receive the punishment of hell. None of us who frequent churches, temples, synagogues, or mosques think of ourselves as bound for hell; we might say we *deserve* to go to hell, but like Catherine the Great, we believe God will forgive us in the end because it's God's job to do so.

That's theological heaven. Psalm 19 is talking about cosmological heaven, or the heavens that present themselves to our senses rather than to our imaginations. These are those vast reaches of space that we can glimpse even with our naked and unaided eye. On a clear night, we may not see billions and billions of stars, but we'll see enough to know that there are far more of them than we can count; our common sense tell us, as it told the writer of Psalm 19, that there must be an awful lot of space to hold all of those stars. Thus the plural, heavens.

Not to mention the sun and moon and comets and all the other celestial phenomena that our ancestors could see more clearly than we can. Their world, you see, was darker than ours, and when it comes to seeing the stars, darkness – real darkness -- is a good thing. The psalmist's world wasn't artificially lit 24/7 as ours is. Most of us have never seen what a star or the moon actually looks like because we've never been free of ambient light. You and I have grown up in a world where the lights are on, somewhere, all the time, and those billions upon billions of lights that burn constantly on planet earth prevent us from seeing what the psalmist saw, and that's the second lesson we should take from Psalm 19: their world was different from ours and in some ways it was better.

The psalmist goes on to talk about the sun, coming forth like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, which means that the sun is radiant in the way that people who have just been married are radiant. And to the psalmist's eyes, as to ours, the sun rises, traverses the sky from east to west, and sets beyond the farthest point that we can see. It's that pre-Copernican, common-sense cosmology in which we believed that it was the sun, rather than the earth, that did the moving; and to most of us, that's still the way reality comes to us, and so we continue to speak of sunrise and sunset even though we know they're both fictions.

But whether the sun moves or the earth moves is of little consequence for people with the eyes to see, the ears to hear, the minds to perceive, and the hearts to love what creation has to tell us about its creator. For religious folks like the psalmist, nature isn't all there is; behind creation stands its author – in “the dim unknown” as James Russell Lowell put it – whose handiwork is the evidence not simply of atoms and molecules, but ultimately of love. Creation – big creation, Carl Sagan's billions and billions of creation, the fact that there's something and not nothing creation – that's the first and clearest and greatest sign of God's love. That's the third lesson to take from Psalm 19.

“I thank You God for most this amazing day” is the way E. E. Cummings put it in one of his most beloved poems. Cummings wasn't known as a particularly religious man, but his poetry reveals a spirituality deeply informed by the revelatory power of nature.

“For the leaping greenly spirits of trees,” Cummings goes on in that poem,  
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything  
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

. . . .

how should tasting touching hearing seeing  
breathing any–lifted from the no  
of all nothing–human merely being

doubt unimaginable You?"

That's God-sized faith, friends, the sort of faith that inspires poets and artists and musicians and preachers when we're at our best. It's the God-sized faith that people feel looking out over the Grand Canyon or at the blue-green sphere of earth from outer space or at the horizon line on Lake Erie. That's religion born of awe and wonder and gratitude.

And it's good religion, as far as it goes, and I suspect most of you embrace it, as I do. But after this beautiful paean to natural revelation, the author of Psalm 19 turns what seems to some of us an unexpected corner and begins extolling the law.

"The law of the Lord is perfect," he says in verse 7, "reviving the soul. The decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple," and so on, down through the list of precepts and commandments and fear and ordinances of verses 8, 9, and 10.

Suddenly we seem to be in a different world from the sun, moon, and stars. Suddenly we seem to be in a world few of us Christians know much about and care even less about, which is that world of the revealed religion of the Old Testament – the sort of stuff we read in Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Leviticus. The stuff the Bible says was revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai and to the judge Samuel and to the prophets like Jeremiah. This was ancient Israel's law and ancient Israel's religion, which they and we believe was given by God in addition to the general religion that anyone can embrace simply by looking up.

This is particular – some would say peculiar – religion, unique to an ancient people who believed that they had been chosen by God to help people the world over answer the fundamental religious question, "How, then, are we to live?" That's the purpose of those decrees and precepts and commandments and ordinances; they were revealed to our religious ancestors to help them and to help us and to help all people answer the question, "How, then, are we to live?"

That's the fourth lesson to take from Psalm 19. Once the awe-inspiring trip to the Grand Canyon is over, and once your space ship has returned to planet earth, and once your feet of clay are back on the ground among others with feet of clay, the question forces itself upon us, "How, then, are we to live?"

How are we to get along with each other in our families, in our neighborhoods, and in our communities? How are nations supposed to live with each other on our increasingly small and crowded and fragile planet? How do people learn to talk to each other across the barriers of race and gender and class and creed?

Answering those questions takes more than awe in creation and gratitude for its gift. Awe is where the answer begins, and awe is where the answer ends, but between its beginning and its end lies that muddled middle, wherein we have to open our eyes and minds and hearts not simply to the magnificent, but also to the minute, to the specific, and to the social world as well as the natural world. For we live in both of those worlds at once – always have and always will.

We need those laws and precepts and statutes and decrees to help us with the details of living with one another. We make laws and rules in general to help us live together, and we make these laws and these rules in particular to make those laws better. The stars won't help us do that, no matter how many their number or how bright their shine. Specific revelation is for specific people living in specific circumstances at specific moments in history – which is where we all must live.

And that's the genius of a God-sized faith: it's micro and it's macro at the same time. The love of God, we believe, encompasses the farthest reaches of space and each falling sparrow – at the same time. A faith in the psalmist's God is faith in a God both beyond history and within history. This God speaks in the sun's course across the sky and also in the command to care for widows, orphans, and strangers. This God isn't too small for the vast eons of evolutionary time or too big to hear the cries of the vulnerable and the oppressed and to demand justice on their behalf.

Wrapping your heart and mind around this kind of "both-and" faith is difficult for a lot of religious people. Most of us gravitate toward one or the other, and we Christians have tended, historically, toward the micro rather than the macro. We've tended to go small rather than go big, because we think we have a better chance of changing ourselves than changing the world.

And while it's true that Jesus was in the wilderness all by himself struggling with evil, it's also true that he took on the Roman empire by pitting his way of life against Caesar's, and he won. Jesus didn't just commend his way of life to individuals; he also stood in the tradition of Israel's prophets who challenged systems and schemes and the perfectly legal and outrageously unfair laws, rules, and policies that allow injustice to flourish and good people to be crucified.

In a few weeks we'll be offering letters to God that we'll have written to our representatives in Congress. Those letters are on behalf of hungry and poor people, and we'll be writing to ask our representatives to use some of our tax dollars to help those who need help, especially the 16 million children in this country who live in poverty. We'll be asking Congress to pay attention to the way laws are written that keep welfare for corporations intact while cutting welfare programs for children in poverty. We'll be asking Congress to invest now in our children so that we don't have to pay a huge price in two or three decades to cope with the effects of people whose development was compromised by childhood malnutrition. We'll be asking Congress to act, representing many of us, as compassionately and generously as we as individuals would act, confronted with the reality of a hungry child. That's what we'll be asking when we write our letters with Bread for the World.

Poverty and hunger are big problems and they require big solutions, and big solutions come from people thinking big, and Bread for the World has people who are trained to help us do just that. And so, on April 26th and May 3rd, we'll write, and on May 10th, we'll offer those letters to God's mercy and grace, praying for God's blessing.

And at the same time, on May 29th, we'll be serving dinner to hungry folks right here in Cleveland as part of our Loaves and Fishes ministry, and at least some of us who will have written letters to Congress on April 26th or May 3rd will also be cooking and serving on May 29th. We'll be doing both because we believe our God-sized faith – faith in the God of the sparrow as well as the whale – calls us to love both problems equally.

God-sized faith encompasses the great and the small, the general and the specific, the distant and the near at hand just as the love of God does. The God who made the Pleiades also cares for the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed. Whether we're peering through a telescope or through a microscope, it's God looking back at us, waiting for us to align our lives with the one who made all, knows all, and loves all.

That's God-sized faith, friends. Try it on this Lent, take it for a spin, live with for a

while. You'll be glad you did.