

"Insignificant Sovereigns"

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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)

A common refrain from the few human beings who have been lucky enough to go into space is that nothing can really prepare you for the moment when you first gaze upon the Earth from a distance. The deep blue of the oceans, the white wisps of clouds, the varying greens of forests and grasslands, and the brownish yellow hues of deserts and mountains all stand in bold relief against a vast black expanse of the universe. When astronauts reflect upon these mental images, it is amazing how often one particular word recurs in their memories. That word is "insignificant."

Looking at earth, Bill Anders of Apollo 8 remembers that the Earth "was the only color we could see in the universe." The sight led him to an epiphany about humankind. "We're living on a tiny little dust mote in the left field on a rather insignificant galaxy. And basically this is it for humans."¹

Jim Lovell, who was with Anders on that same mission, and who would later command the ill-fated voyage of Apollo 13, was also moved by the sight of Earth from afar. "*It gives you in an instant,*" he said,

*"just at a position 240,000 miles away from it, (an idea of) how insignificant we are, how fragile we are, and how fortunate we are to have a body that will allow us to enjoy the sky and the trees and the water ... It's something that many people take for granted when they're born and they grow up within the environment. But they don't realize what they have. And I didn't till I left it."*²

Although these views from out there looking back were assisted by Saturn V rockets, countless engineers, millions of NASA dollars and more than 7 million pounds of thrust, the sentiments they inspired were basically the same as those of the ancient psalmist who was down here looking out. Thousands of years ago, as this poet philosopher gazed up at the night sky, he too was moved to ponder the insignificance of human existence. "*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?*"

¹ http://www.nbcnews.com/id/18202449/ns/technology_and_science-space/t/mankinds-rarest-view-earth-afar/#.WTaycfnyvX4

² *Id.*

And yet, even as our insignificance in the wide expanse of God's universe is being made so overtly plain, the stargazing psalmist also receives a second, somewhat contradictory message. He also knows that, for some reason, God has chosen to elevate us to a very special cosmic status. As insignificant as we are, have been made significant by a God who has great hopes and expectations for us. Humans have been crowned with glory and honor, even to the point of being made just a little lower than God. For some unknown reason, we have been awarded dominion over -- and responsibility for -- the manifestly glorious works of God's hands.

Interestingly, the astronauts also received this second half of the revelation in the view they saw out of their spacecraft windows. Just like the psalmist, they seem to have been simultaneously moved both by how insignificant we were on a cosmic scale and how very significant we are when it comes to our own planetary home. Homer Newell, one of the most respected authorities on the American space program, once reported that, when our astronauts stood on the barren landscape of the moon and looked back at the beautiful, blue, fragile earth, they were never the same. "It awakened," he said, "a heightened appreciation of and sense of responsibility toward our home in space. In the entire solar system, 6 billion miles across, only Earth so far as we now know nourishes the vast abundance of life that we so casually accept."³

Winston Scott, veteran of two shuttle missions, said it this way: *"From up there, [Earth] looks finite and it looks fragile and it really looks like just a tiny little place on which we live in a vast expanse of space. It gave me the feeling of really wanting us all to take care of the Earth. I got more of a sense of Earth as home, a place where we live. And of course you want to take care of your home. You want it clean. You want it safe."*⁴

More concise was John Glenn, an astronaut, U.S. Senator and faithful Presbyterian, who simply said that *"You come back impressed, once you've been up there, with how thin our little atmosphere is that supports all life here on Earth. So if we foul it up, there's no coming back from something like that."*⁵

Over thousands of years, the view has not changed. Our vantage points may be different, but what the panorama tells us remains the same. As humans, we are dusty specks, on a dusty ball, orbiting a very average star, in a vast galaxy – one of millions if not billions in the universe. And at the same time we have been made royalty, anointed and crowned with dominion over God's miraculous handiwork: insignificant, but sovereign nonetheless.

I once heard preacher and author Tony Campolo tell a story about a father who lived in a small Midwestern town. The man had a daughter who couldn't have been more than four or five. Her name was Janice. Early one morning, when it was still dark, a huge thunderstorm came over the house – the kind where the flashes of lightning are almost immediately followed by massive thunder claps that seem to be right on top of you. The booms were rattling the walls. When one strike hit so close that his hair stood on end, he figured he better go check on Janice. She had to be scared, he thought. He got quickly out of bed and ran upstairs to his little girl's room. When he opened the door, he expected to see her cowering under her sheets. But she wasn't. She was standing on the windowsill, pressing as much of her body as she could up to the glass. Rain was pounding the panes and huge flashes of light were popping everywhere.

"Janice," he cried, "what are you doing?!"

"Hold on, dad," she said, "I think God is trying to take my picture!"

³ Homer E. Newell, "The Legacy of Apollo," <https://www.hq.nasa.gov/pao/History/SP-350/ch-15-1.html>

⁴ http://www.nbcnews.com/id/18202449/ns/technology_and_science-space/t/mankinds-rarest-view-earth-afar/#.WTaycfnyvX4

⁵ *Id.*

When we look at the heavens, the work of God's fingers, the moon and the stars that God has established, we cannot help but wonder, "What are human beings, O Lord, that you are mindful of us? In the great expanse of the universe, who are we, that you would even bother to care for us?"

And the answer that comes back from the stars is this: "You are my priceless creation. You may be small, and you may be weak, but you are precious in my sight. You are the apple of my eye, the ones I have chosen. This floating ball, this fragile blue planet, I give to you. I only ask that, whatever you choose to do here, you do it in ways that honor me."

So, on this Trinity Sunday, all we can say is what the psalmist proclaims for us: "O Lord, our God, how majestic is your name in all the earth!"

Amen.