

“Star Gazing”

Psalm 8

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This morning our attention is drawn to a Psalm that is connected to America’s Space Program in two ways. The two events occurred on the same voyage.

On July 20, 1969, Apollo 11 landed on the moon. One of the items left there by Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin was a disc containing messages from 73 nations around the world. One of those messages was from the Vatican, and Pope Paul VI chose to include Psalm 8 in his text.

Soon after lifting off from the surface of the moon, Aldrin, the Lunar Module Pilot, found himself reflecting upon his days on the moon and the magnificence of the universe. In his final television broadcast during the return to earth, Aldrin summed up his feelings by quoting a portion of Psalm 8.

“When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, and the moon and stars which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him and the son of man that you care for him?” (Psalm 8:3-4)

Isn’t it interesting that Aldrin chose a three thousand year old text to express his feelings as he concluded the most historic journey man has ever taken? I suppose this is a tribute to the power of poetry and an indication of how relevant and important the entire book of Psalms is to shedding light on the mysteries of life and faith.

I wonder how old David was when he voiced these words and where he was when uttered them. Was he star gazing on a quiet hillside during his youthful days as a shepherd? Was he the king of Israel standing on the roof of his palace?

Perhaps it was both. His love of nature probably began as a shepherd boy and remained with him all his life. He might have started this poem in his youth and added to it down through the years.

What we are confident about is that it must have been night when these words were spoken and later put to song. There is no mention of the sun in the listing of the heavenly bodies, only the moon and stars.

What was the Psalmist feeling that night as he was star gazing? It appears he was overwhelmed with a sense of wonder, awe, gratitude and humility.

It is obvious David was struck by both the beauty and vastness of the universe. Nothing humans made could compare.

What he saw that crystal clear night could have only been imagined in the mind of God and crafted by the hands of a powerfully creative God. To say the least, David was in awe of God as he took the time to study the moon and stars in all of their splendor.

“O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.” (Psalm 8:1)

I also sense a deep level of gratitude and humility in David’s words. David was overcome with the thought God would include humans in this creative process, and this included him in particular. What did David do to deserve his place on earth?

Nothing, and David knew it. This holy and powerful God was also a generous and gracious God, and David was grateful beyond words.

“O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” Every parcel of David’s attention when he sang this hymn of praise was fixed upon God. As a matter of fact, with only

one exception, the subject of each verb in this chapter is God. Only the third verse focuses our attention upon David, the author.

I read something else in David's words that night, however, and that is bewilderment. He was confused, which should not surprise us. In the presence of God, as theologian Dr. Colin Harris is fond of saying, the only response is a sense of mystery that we can touch but never grasp.

"When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?

You have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have made him ruler over the works of your hands.

You put everything under his feet: all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air and the fish of the sea, all which swim the paths of the sea.

"O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" (Psalm 8:3-9)

Why would a God responsible for the creation and care of such an immense universe have the time or interest to care about a weak, frail and short-lived mortal like him? Why, in heavens name, would God turn the management and welfare of the world he carefully and thoughtfully created over to flawed people like David? Why would God use the words of children, the feeblest among them and the very opposite of the majestic heavens, to fulfill his dreams and overcome his foes?

David doesn't answer these questions; they are rhetorical, fodder for pondering. David did, however, accept the fact that God chose to include him and to partner with him to make God's dreams come true.

This should shed light on our own journey. The relationship God had with David is what God desires for all his children, including each one of us.

What difference do you think it made in David's life when he understood how personal, loving and caring God is? I believe it enhanced his self-esteem and increased his level of confidence.

If the God who created the universe knew David's name and everything about him, then I want to believe David surmised he must be of great value. All feelings of insignificance a young shepherd boy may have felt or sense of unworthiness a sinful king struggled with had to vanish in thin air. No one God knew could be unimportant, and no one God loved could be cast away.

Furthermore, God's awareness of David as an individual with a tangled mess of hopes and dreams, worries and fears, problems and challenges had to assure him he was never alone. At all times and all places, God was with David, even when others were unaware of what David needed or could not be by his side.

Never would David have to meet life's challenges relying solely upon his wisdom and ability. The one who created him and everything around him would supply his deepest needs.

I also want to believe David's awareness of God's goodness and faithfulness made him more responsible, or at least made him aware of how important it was that he make wise decisions. If David, like all of God's children, was charged with taking care of the world God created, then he needed to take every decision seriously by weighing the short and long-term consequences.

Too much was at stake to do otherwise. The abuse of time, talents, resources and authority would penalize those depending upon David and disrupt the creative order.

Especially as king of Israel, David needed to guard against putting the lives of others and the welfare of the universe in jeopardy. There was no excuse for being selfish, immature and irresponsible.

At the same time, the intimate involvement of God in David's life should have sent a message to him there was no reason to pretend he was something he was not or attempt to hide his mistakes from God. God loved him at his best and his worst, and God would never quit caring for him, even when God was disappointed in him.

This creative God who valued order knew how to deal with chaos. As a matter of fact, God was adept at bringing order out of chaos and turning winter into spring. God would always be there for David to help him recover from his mistakes and rebuild his life.

Based upon some of David's other words in Psalms, there is one other thing I believe David gleaned from studying the moon and stars that evening. The relationship David enjoyed with God would not end at the grave. There had to be more; the God who created this amazingly beautiful universe was still at work.

"...and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever," David wrote to conclude the 23rd Psalm. I think I know when this idea was birthed.

What difference could it make in your life if you embraced Psalm 8? What impact would this psalm have upon your self-esteem and confidence if you sang these words with a grateful heart as David did? How could this poem speak to you as you wrestle with life's challenges and chart a path forward?

On a beautiful evening in Washington, D.C., President Franklin D. Roosevelt and one of his closest aides, Bernard Baruch, talked late into the night at the White House. At last, President Roosevelt suggested they go into the Rose Garden to look at the moon and the stars before going to bed.

After gazing into the heavens for several minutes, President Roosevelt broke the silence by saying, "All right, I think we feel small enough now to go to sleep."

Let me encourage you to do some star gazing this summer, which was a favorite pastime of mine as a child growing up on a farm. And when you do, take time to thank God for creating this beautiful world.

Allow the beauty of the universe to conjure up your own feelings of wonder and awe, gratitude and humility. Draw close to the God who knows your name and renew your commitment to be a wise and responsible caretaker of all God has created.

Voice your hopes and dreams, worries and fears, challenges and problems as you commune with God. Ask God for wisdom, guidance, strength, courage, forgiveness and peace as you seek to do his will and to reflect his nature.

There is one other thing I would encourage you to do. Think about who needs you to care for them as God cares for you.

What you could do to enhance their self-esteem and bolster their confidence? Call them by name? Listen to their story? Share what you have that would help them get started or re-started?

There is a variety of ways to make hope visible. Ask the God of the universe who has been so good to you to show you what you need to do for someone this week.