

## The Grace of the World Psalm 8

It's time again for a little lesson in astronomy.

They say that there are *at least*

10 billion galaxies in the cosmos (at least)

and in each galaxy over 100 billion stars.<sup>1</sup>

Here's where we are:

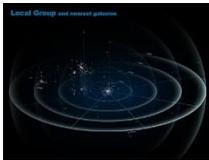
we are located in what is called

the Virgo Supercluster.



A supercluster is a collection of galaxies  
large and small.

Within our supercluster we are part  
of what is called the Local Group.



Within The Local Group there are 54 galaxies,  
the Milky Way and the Andromeda Galaxies  
are the largest,  
but still over 2 million light years apart.

Within the Milky Way,



we are on one of the spiral arms,  
called Orion's Arm about 2/3 of the way  
out from the center of the galaxy.

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Hoezee, [https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/trinity-sunday-c-2/?type=the\\_lectionary\\_psalms](https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/trinity-sunday-c-2/?type=the_lectionary_psalms)



There are 8-9 planets in our solar system  
—this depends on whether you are on team Pluto or not  
—and there are also numerous comets,  
asteroids and dwarf planets.  
Earth is the third planet from the sun.

This is important because  
there is not another planet in our solar system  
that supports life, as we know it.  
We have not yet discovered life,  
as we know it, to exist anywhere else  
within the our Milky Way galaxy.

I'm not saying it does or it does,  
I'm saying we don't know.  
In fact we haven't even traveled  
or seen all there is to see  
because the Milky Way galaxy  
is 100,000 light years across.

So Earth's placement  
in relation to our sun, is perfect.  
A little closer to the sun  
and we'd be too hot for life.  
A little further away  
and we'd be too cold for life as we know it.  
"A little too far to either side,  
and the nature of the [whole] cosmos  
would be radically different.  
[For instance if we were to]  
tweak the relative strength of gravity,  
then either no stars form,  
no heavy elements are forged  
—or huge stars form and are quickly gone,  
leaving nothing of any import in their wake,  
no descendants,

no pathway to life.”<sup>2</sup>

This life we share

hangs in a beautifully delicate balance.

Its substance is that life,

and specifically life like that on Earth,

will always inhabit the border

or interface between zones

defined by certain parameters.

Factors such as the stability

or chaos of planetary orbits,

or the variations of climate

and geophysics on a planet,

are direct manifestations of characteristics

such as energy, location,

scale, time, order and disorder.

Too far away from such borders,

in either direction,

and the balance for life tips

toward a hostile state.

***Life like us requires the right mix of ingredients,***

***of calm and chaos***

***—the right yin and yang.***<sup>3</sup>

Psalm 8:1-4

<sup>1</sup> O Lord, our Sovereign,

how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have set your glory above the heavens.

<sup>2</sup> Out of the mouths of babes and infants

you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,

to silence the enemy and the avenger.

<sup>3</sup> When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars that you have established;

<sup>4</sup> what are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
mortals that you care for them?

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/is-earth-s-life-unique-in-the-universe/>

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

I love that the psalmist  
can write such incredible poetry  
having never even seen the cosmos  
except with his naked eye.  
The psalmist sings out praises to God  
without ever having seen the images  
that the Hubble telescope has sent us.



Years ago, when Time magazine  
published these pictures the Hubble had taken  
of giant, pillar clouds of gas,  
someone later wrote  
in a letter to the editor saying,  
“...these photos should *finally* put an end  
to the religious idea that humanity  
amounts to anything.  
Not only are we clearly  
not the center of the universe,  
this person wrote,  
we don’t even register.”<sup>4</sup>

Genesis 1:26  
“Then God said,  
‘Let us make humankind in our image,  
according to our likeness;  
and let them have dominion  
over the fish of the sea,  
and over the birds of the air,  
and over the cattle,  
and over all the wild animals of the earth,  
and over every creeping thing  
that creeps upon the earth.’”

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<sup>4</sup> Scott Hoezee, [https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/trinity-sunday-c-2/?type=the\\_lectionary\\_psalms](https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/trinity-sunday-c-2/?type=the_lectionary_psalms)

Just this Wednesday  
I brought in my philodendron  
from the front porch,  
you know because it can't bring itself inside  
and it would freeze  
like the mums I left outside  
in this week's nighttime cold temps.

Our createdness within a creation  
is a gift of awareness and mindfulness;  
we are able to take in  
this beautifully, complex system  
—symbiotic and dynamic.

We can observe that  
tectonic plates are always shifting;  
waves are constantly churning;  
that a breeze in the summer is heavenly;  
and know the colder it is in Michigan  
the better tasting more nutritious  
the carrot crop will be.

While the sun rises on one side of the world,  
the other side rests in slumber.  
Remember the solar eclipse of 2017?  
When here in Hickory,  
in the middle of the day,  
it grew not quite dark, but eerily dim;  
the birds stopped singing  
and the crickets and cicadas started chirping  
as if it were evening.

How many of us stood outside  
with our special glasses,  
because this was worth witnessing?



Did you know the pygmy shrew,  
is the second smallest mammal

on the planet—and has to eat constantly  
to keep up with their voracious metabolism.  
Bees are needed to pollenate fruit trees  
so we will have peaches  
from Georgia and South Carolina.



The short-tailed albatross,  
and many other marine birds  
have built in desalination glands  
so they can survive on seawater.

Divers in Norway  
were looking for wreckage  
from the WWII shipwrecks  
and came across a giant orb,  
which turned out to be the egg sac of a giant squid.  
As they filmed they found they could see  
thousands of tiny baby squid  
swimming around in that sac.



Psalm 8:4-9

<sup>4</sup> what are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
mortals that you care for them?

<sup>5</sup> Yet you have made them a little lower than God,  
and crowned them with glory and honor.

<sup>6</sup> You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;  
you have put all things under their feet,  
<sup>7</sup> all sheep and oxen,  
and also the beasts of the field,  
<sup>8</sup> the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,  
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

<sup>9</sup> O Lord, our Sovereign,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

All this boils down to saying,  
the universe is stuffed,  
clogged,  
overflowing  
with wonder.

If we go down to the microscopic level,  
and examine our little patch of grass  
—well the NY Times speculates  
that the Earth is home  
to a trillion species of microbes.<sup>5</sup>

With all this creation,  
it is a wonder that we do in fact matter,  
to God or all.

Yet psalm 8 that reminds us that we,  
like everything else in all of creation,  
do in fact matter  
to the Creator of the entire cosmos.  
Not only do we matter,  
we have a specific job,  
as stewards, caretakers  
of this beautiful, delicate place.

Barbara Brown Taylor says  
that in the resurrection of the body we see that  
matter, matters to God.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/24/science/one-trillion-microbes-on-earth.html#targetText=According%20to%20a%20new%20estimate,the%20number%20of%20insect%20species>.



But this isn't limited to just bodies;  
it encompasses God's love for the pygmy shrew,  
the giant squid, the long leaf pine,  
the climbing roses, the Carpathian Mountains,  
the Rangipo Desert in New Zealand  
and the corner of 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave and 2<sup>nd</sup> St. NW.  
All of it is declared good and a delight to God,  
every inch worm and yellow lab.  
For far too long  
we've been fearful to celebrate  
Mother Nature or Mother Earth  
especially in the church.  
We are fearful that somehow  
mentioning those names,  
celebrating creation or  
loving the earth makes us heretics.

But that is short sided.

In our scriptures God's goodness and blessing  
have always been viewed in the dirt,  
the rocks, the trees, the plentiful harvest;  
God's promise  
is lived out in a land of milk and honey;  
God's salvation is described  
where there is a feast on the mountain  
with good wine.

"God's plans, purposes, and promises  
are again and again tied together  
with things like soil and fruit,  
flocks and meadows, wine and wheat."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Scott Hoezee, [https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/trinity-sunday-c-2/?type=the\\_lectionary\\_psalms](https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/trinity-sunday-c-2/?type=the_lectionary_psalms)

We aren't heretics for loving  
and therefore caring for creation.  
God loves and cares for creation  
—it was birthed by the divine  
and mysterious calling forth,  
Creation was told to be creators!  
Land is told to give birth to flowers and trees,  
seas are called to fill themselves with fish  
and thousands of baby squid.

God is the artist and maker of all of creation  
—to gaze at a field of wild flowers  
or a bale of fresh cut hay and see God  
isn't declaring the earth  
or creation to be its own god.  
Rather it the giftedness  
of being a conscious creature  
where you have the eyes to see  
just like the psalmist,  
that God's handiwork is in everything.



Seeing God's handiwork means,  
you see the mark of the artist  
on every blade of grass,  
every pink and orange and purple sunset,  
the same way you look at a Starry Night  
and know it is one of Van Gogh's:  
you see the rolling Appalachian mountains  
and see the work of God's hands.

And to think,  
God has gifted us with being able to  
see God and God's love and mastery  
poured out in the diversity  
of this amazing creation.

God has gifted us,  
with the minds and hearts to be  
caretakers and lovers  
with a fierce devotion to:  
this land,  
to this green space,  
to this expanse under the blue sky.  
Biblical scholar Larry Rasmussen said,  
“perhaps the ultimate reason  
why we will one day beat swords into plowshares  
–or maybe we’d have to say  
beat armored Howitzer tanks  
into John Deere garden tractors  
–is not only so that warfare will cease  
but also so that we can return  
to our proper vocation of earth-keeping,  
of tending and tilling the garden  
of God’s good creation.”<sup>7</sup>



Wendell Berry is a 5th generation farmer  
in Henry County, Kentucky.

He is a trained and accomplished writer and poet.

His many writings include a voice for the land,  
a defense for farmers  
and call to Christians  
to remember again,  
the divine calling of being caretakers of creation.

Wendell Berry—The Peace of Wild Things

<https://onbeing.org/poetry/the-peace-of-wild-things/> (audio)

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<sup>7</sup> ibid

When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free

Now I know not all of us want to be farmers.  
Not all of us feel adequately blessed  
with wanting to till the soil  
and plant pole beans and silver queen corn.  
But you don't have to have a green thumb  
to love and care for the Earth.  
To see the delicate balance of life as God sees it:  
good and fruitful,  
bless-ed.

I'm often sadden and overwhelmed  
by the lack of care we as a fellow species  
seem to have for the environment,  
especially as Christians.  
To turn our backs on caring for creation  
is to turn our backs on what God loves;  
it is to turn our backs  
to the divine calling given to us  
by our own maker and creator.

It is to ignore our placement  
within the beautiful diversity of creation itself;  
To treat with disregard  
our insignificance that is married  
to our uniqueness in the cosmos.

I want my children,  
better yet I want *our children*  
to grow up knowing

what the changing seasons look like.  
I want them to understand  
the importance of glaciers  
in relation to polar bears  
and Alaskan salmon.  
I want our grandchildren,  
and the next generations after that  
to know why lions are predators  
and why the rainforests are important.

Creation isn't just a resource  
for us to deplete.

Creation, in its own right praises the Almighty  
—the trees of the field clap their hands  
the prophet declares.

The Pharisee once told Jesus  
his disciples were too loud  
and Jesus told them back  
that if the disciples were quite  
the rocks would cry out.



What are the rocks saying these days?  
If creation gives an account of our stewardship,  
what would the report be?

Our lives are so small  
in comparison to the vastness of the universe.  
“[But] it is precisely our God-likeness  
that allows us to feel small in the first place.  
We have an ability which,  
so far as we can tell,

no other critter on the planet has:  
namely, the ability to note,  
study,  
appreciate,  
catalog,  
photograph,  
record,  
and celebrate otherness.”<sup>8</sup>

You see our caring of creation  
is caring for something that God loves.  
Something that God created out of love.  
That is the grace of the world.  
The gift of caring for something beloved;  
we don't deserve it but get to do it anyway.

Caring for and being good stewards of *creation*  
shows our Creator  
that we understand  
our placement in the world,  
small yet mighty.

Being the stewards we are called to be  
is recognizing that are made in that divine image  
that sees as a creator sees,  
the handiwork of God everywhere.  
May we teach our children  
to marvel at our smallness and our giftedness  
within a the grace of creation  
and the grace of the world.

Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> ibid