

Five Billion Neighbors?
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Readings

Psalm 19 – translated and interpreted by Stephen Mitchell

The heavens declare God's grandeur
 and the radiance from which they arise.
Each dawn tells of God's beauty;
 each night shines with God's grace.
Their testimony speaks to the whole world
 and reaches to the ends of the earth.
In them is a path for the sun,
 who steps forth handsome as a bridegroom
 and rejoices like an athlete as he runs.
The sun starts at one end of the heavens
 and circles to the other end,
 and nothing can hide from the sun's heat.

God's universe is perfect,
 awing the mind.
God's truth is subtle,
 baffling the intellect.
God's law is total,
 quickenning the breath.
God's compassion is fathomless,
 refreshing the soul.
God's justice is absolute,
 lighting up the eyes.
God's love is radiant,
 rejoicing the heart,
more precious than the finest gold,
 sweeter than honey from the comb.

Help me to be aware of my selfishness,
 but without undue shame or self-judgment.
Let me know that you are always present,
 in every atom of my life.
Let me keep surrendering my self
 until I am utterly transparent.
Let my words be rooted in honesty
 and my thoughts be lost in your light,
Un-nameable God, my essence,
 my origin, my life-blood, my home.

“The Pale Blue Dot” by Carl Sagan

We succeeded in taking that picture [of the earth from deep space, several billion miles away], and, if you look at it, you see a dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever lived, lived out their lives. The aggregate of all our joys and sufferings, thousands of confident religions, ideologies and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilizations, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every hopeful child, every mother and father, every inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every superstar, every supreme leader, every saint and sinner in the history of our species, lived there on a mote of dust, suspended in a sunbeam.

The earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that in glory and in triumph they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of the dot on scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner of the dot. How frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds. Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity -- in all this vastness -- there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves. It is up to us. It's been said that astronomy is a humbling, and I might add, a character-building experience. To my mind, there is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly and compassionately with one another and to preserve and cherish that pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known.

Sermon

A few weeks ago astronomers reported that of the several hundred billion stars in our Milky Way galaxy, several billion – maybe five, maybe twenty – of those stars are likely to have what are described as earth-like planets circling them. What is “earth-like”? Well, somewhat close in size to earth, rocky like the earth (not gaseous like Jupiter or Saturn), and about the right distance from their star to have a range of temperatures maybe suitable to life more or less as we know it.

I don't know about you, but I found this to be astonishing as well as challenging news!

Not that we *know* there is intelligent life elsewhere in our galaxy, but I am intrigued simply to have learned that the chances suddenly seem heightened, that we just might indeed have five billion (or so, what's a billion or two among friends...) living – and maybe a few of them even intelligent – neighbors.

So *then* I found myself asking: What difference does it make to the way I/we understand ourselves, our human species, our little planet simply to consider that we might not be alone in the universe?

Then... what difference would it make if and when we came to know for certain that there is intelligent life not all that far away within the vastness of the universe... neighbors in our very own galaxy.

Then... what difference would it make if we were contacted by that life?
With all this in mind, I asked around the dinner table a day or two after Thanksgiving that question: What difference would it make?
One of the first answers was: Well, we should behave better, clean up our act, tidy up our little planet!

What an interesting answer! After all, we sweep and vacuum and put aside family arguments before guests arrive in our homes. Why not clean up the whole planet and put an end to our petty disputes to welcome guests from way further away than, say, Springfield or Sacramento or Singapore.

Reminds me of the story of the parish priest who looks out his window and sees Jesus approaching. Quickly he calls the Vatican and asks what he should do. The answer comes back just as quickly: Look busy!

Of course we need to do more than look busy in order to be more presentable to a galactic visitor... (not to mention a second coming of divinity!).

But aside from maybe wanting to clean-up our human act on this little planet we call earth, we might want to prepare some questions for our visitors.

Paul Whitefield, a blogger for the *Los Angeles Times* made a list of questions (mostly tongue-in-cheek) he would want to ask of a neighboring civilization elsewhere in our galaxy. His questions included:

Is there American-style democracy there, or do they have some kind of government that actually works?

Do our distant neighbors have cable TV? If so, did they understand Episode 3 of this season's "Homeland"?

Have they invented cellphone service in which calls never get dropped?

But then Whitefield did get serious with his last question:

And, is it possible to have clean air, clean water and no hunger and no war? OK, how?

Well, I hope we don't have to wait for communication from a distant galactic neighbor for an answer to that question. Indeed, in the Pale Blue Dot reading we heard Carl Sagan, for one, affirm that in the vastness of the universe we cannot *afford* to wait for a visitor from afar to save us from ourselves.

He of course was right.

And it is my fervent *hope* (if not firm belief) that we do not have to wait... because (and I know sometimes people are skeptical on this point) I do believe there *is* intelligent life on earth; the only question is whether there is enough of it.

We do have examples... exemplars! Indeed, there is no better example of intelligent life on earth – absolutely no better example in our time – than in the person of Nelson Mandela.

Mandela: A man who had intelligence not only of the head, but of the heart: The intelligence to turn from violence to non-violence; the intelligence to leave bitterness behind in favor of reconciliation; the intelligence to understand that beneath all of our differences – of color and background and circumstance – we are one humanity on one earth, and we must learn to get along and share, share resources, share power, share our

lives; the intelligence to know how to bring ideals from head to heart to hands; the intelligence to know that love is more powerful than hate.

In this spirit, then, if we ever do have communication or visitors from elsewhere in the galaxy, would we not want ourselves to be judged not by our reality television programs; not by our frenzied shopping on Black Friday – which this year featured two people wrestling on the floor of a mall somewhere, I suppose fighting over the last this or that from the store’s shelves; not by the might of our military... but by the likes of Nelson Mandela? Isn’t that how we would want to be seen and judged?

And shouldn’t this be a lesson for how we – all of us – ought actually to *live* in order to have clean air, clean water and no hunger and no war? Before it is indeed too late?

How, then, do we get there?

An intriguing clue comes from the eighteenth century philosopher Immanuel Kant, one of the enlightenment philosophers who served as inspiration to Emerson and the other Transcendentalists. Kant wrote:

There are two things that fill my soul with holy reverence and ever-growing wonder – the spectacle of the starry sky that virtually annihilates us as physical beings, and the moral law which raises us to infinite dignity as intelligent agents.

There are two things that fill my soul with holy reverence and ever-growing wonder. (It is worth noting here that if the starry sky inspired reverence and wonder for Kant more than two hundred years ago, how much more so now that we know how huge beyond comprehension the universe is: billions and billions, as Carl Sagan once said – billions of stars, billions of galaxies, billions and billions and billions of miles, billions of years...)

But be the billions as they may, Kant’s sentiment leads me back to Psalm 19 which we heard earlier.

There are some commentators on that Psalm who believe it was at first two different Psalms, which were at some point patched together. This, since the first part is a psalm of praise for the wonders of the universe, that amazement at “the spectacle of the starry sky.” And then the second part shifts dramatically to a meditation on the moral law of God coupled with a supplication, a prayer, that the singer of the psalm come to know God and to know and better live by God’s laws.

But whether the Psalm was two and then patched together, or always one single song, the two sections of the psalm are as intimately related – and in a very similar way – as the two clauses of the sentence from Kant.

What is this relation about?

Here’s a start: Many of the ancient scriptures of all traditions affirm that whatever or whomever God is, God is somehow infinitely large and infinitely small – as large or larger than the universe itself, and as small or smaller than a “hidden cave in our hearts” as Hindu scripture sometimes puts it. But... one indivisible reality we call divine.

Which means that in some way we can know God or have an intuition or experience of God, some reality by whatever name that transcends our ordinary lives, both through contemplating in wonder the night sky and the vastness of the universe beyond our ordinary comprehension *and* through contemplating the sense of morality and fairness that really does seem to be somehow deeply built into the fabric of our lives, our hearts, our being (at least for most of us).

Call it all God – or call it simply, as Carl Sagan did, Cosmos.

Yet this we know: standing before this two-fold mystery, really allowing ourselves to be present to this two-fold mystery of the starry sky at night and the moral law within, can be – really *ought* to be if we're paying attention – awe-inspiring in two ways. For this two-fold mystery inspires the feeling of awe and wonder (wonder which, Plato told us a long time ago, is the beginning of philosophy, the love of wisdom); and in turn this awe and wonder can inspire a changed life... a life lived more closely aligned with wisdom and love.

Inspires us, to put it another way, to ask the question: How do I want to be in this universe? (How would I want to present myself to those guests from afar if ever they come...?)

Do I want to be like those people wrestling on the floor of the mall? Or do I aspire to be at least a little more like a Nelson Mandela, learning to put aside hate and bitterness in favor of love and reconciliation?

Because each individual life – yours, mine, everyone's – in this most amazing universe is short. Yet whatever else this life and universe, cosmos, we share is all about, love would seem surely to be at the heart of it.

All of which seems to me to be apt meditation for this season of approaching solstice... when the night sky even in our populated region is often darker and clearer than at other times of the year, offering a bit more than we get at other seasons of that starry night to inspire our awe and wonder.

And an apt meditation for this season of Advent, as we approach Christmas, and hear again the Christmas story reminding us of the possibility of the re-birth of love in our hearts and in our lives and just maybe in this often troubled world of ours.

May it be so.