

## Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on the 29th Sunday in Ordinary time, October 19, 1997: Scripture Lessons: Job 28:1-7; Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35c; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

When we were children many of us learned the Mother Goose nursery rhyme,

Twinkle, twinkle, little star,  
How I wonder what you are!  
Up above the world so high,  
Like a diamond in the sky.

When I was a child I *wondered* what stars were. I *wondered* if stars were pin pricks in a cosmic astrodome through which the light of heaven shined. When I grew older I became aware of scientific explanations of stars. I *wondered* when I learned that stars are distant suns in our Milky Way Galaxy whose heat and fires are fueled by the fusion of hydrogen gas. I became a teenager and *wondered* when I learned that some points of light in the night time sky aren't stars or planets, but distant galaxies made up of millions of stars.

But these scientific explanations of stars have never be adequate for me. I need something more than a scientific explanation. In C.S. Lewis's book, *The Voyage of the Dawntrader*, Lucy, Edmund and Eustace, have entered the land of Narnia through a closet in their uncle's attic. Once there in Narnia they accompany Prince Caspian and a crew of sailors on a voyage to a magical island near the end of the world. On the island they come upon an old man with a long silver beard which came down to his bare feet. His robe appeared to be made from the fleece of silver sheep. Without speaking he lifted up his arms and began to sing. And as he sang, "the gray clouds lifted from the eastern sky and the white patches grew bigger and bigger till it was all white, and the sea began to shine like silver... the east began to turn red and at last, unclouded, the sun came up out of the sea." After sunrise the Old Man turned to the travelers and welcomed them.

"I am Ramandu," he said. "... the days when I was a star ceased long before any of you knew this world."

"Aren't you a star any longer?" asked Lucy.

"I am a star at rest," he answered. "When I set for the last time, decrepit and old beyond all that you can reckon, I was carried to this island. I am not so old now as I was then. Every morning a bird brings me a fire-berry from the valleys in the Sun, and each fire-berry takes away a little of my age. And when I have become as young as the child that was born yesterday, then I shall take my rising again... and once more tread the great dance."

"In our world," said Eustace, "a star is a huge ball of flaming gas."

"Even in your world, my son, that is not what a star is but only what it is made of."

I find that passage profoundly moving. Artists and poets can tell us as much, if not more, about the stars than scientists can. Scientists can tell us what stars are made of. But they can't tell us what they are. It takes artists and poets and theologians to remind us that *we don't know what stars are*, and that's why the stars make us wonder.

In one of my all time favorite poems, Gerard Manley Hopkins tells us,

Look at the stars! look, look up at the skies!  
O look at all the fire-folk sitting in the air!  
The bright boroughs, the circle-citadels there!  
Down in dim woods the diamond delves! the elves'-eyes!  
The gray lawns cold where gold, where quickgold lies!

Don't ask me to explain that poem. I can't explain it. Intellectually I don't understand it very well. But when I look up at the stars on a cloudless, moonless night, I repeat the words of that poem and am filled with wonder as I ask myself what the stars are.

Now - turn your attention to Job. Job has been looking for God and hasn't been able to find him. Suddenly he gets what he asks for. God becomes present to him. God speaks directly to him. The problem is God doesn't answer any of the questions that Job has asked. Instead the Lord asks Job questions which don't explain anything. And one of the questions the Lord asks Job is, "Where were you when ... the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?"

Some parts of the Bible are addressed to our wills like the *Ten Commandments*. *Do this! Do that!* The commandments appeal to our will. The proper response to the Word of God when

it comes to us in the form of commandments is obedience. Some parts of the Bible appeal to our intellect. For example, Paul's letters in the New Testament tell us how we are justified and made right with God. He appeals to our intellect and understanding. The proper response to the Word of God when it appeals to our intellect is to use our minds to understand God's Word better. But many parts of the Bible appeal neither to our wills or to our intellects but to our imagination. The passage that we read today in Job is one of them. "Where were you when ... the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?" Let that speak to our imagination! Let that take us beyond scientific explanations and move us to wonder. The proper response to the Word of God when it appeals to our imagination is wonder. The Lord wants us to imagine what we cannot see or hear or touch. He wants us to wonder when our capacity for understanding is inadequate.

Elizabeth Achtemeier, a retired professor at Union Seminary in Virginia, asks, "Why did God create the world?" She reminds us that God did not create the world because he had to. He did not create the universe out of loneliness because he existed from all eternity within the community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God was never lonely. So there was no necessity for God to create the universe. So why did God create the universe? Achtemeier writes: "I would like to suggest that God made this world because he is a music lover." He created the stars and sun and moon and the entire universe to sing and praise God's goodness, grace and love. The Psalmist writes,

Praise him, sun and moon,  
Praise him, all stars of light...  
Praise the name of the Lord,  
for he commanded and they were created. (Psalm 148)

The stars sing God's praises along with all of creation. God created all creatures to sing and praise the grace and love that created them. Humpback whales sing God's praises. Thrushes and finches sing God's praises. The mountains and the trees clap their hands and sing God's praises. All creation sings songs of praise to its Maker. We think it's just poetic license and exaggeration when Job speaks of the morning stars singing together. But physicists tell us

that there's a regular energy pulsing from quasars ten billion light years away, in a remarkable rhythm, that there *is* a kind of music of the spheres (Achtemeier).

God is a music lover who wants to hear creation sing. God is the audience and we, along with all creation, are the theater of God's glory. Now if stars and humpback whales can sing God's praises so should we. We human beings were created to join in the song of the universe. We were made to glorify God. Our human voices were meant to join with the stars in singing of God's love in Jesus Christ. But of all God's creatures humankind is the one creature which rebels. We resist singing of God's grace and love that comes to us through Jesus Christ.

But as our love for God grows our singing will get better. The morning stars sing because they love God. Thrushes and finches sing because they love God. Humpback whales sing because they love God. The moon, stars, and sun all sing because they love God. No creature can love God without singing. And when we human creatures grow in our love for God we will join the choir of creation and sing of God's grace and love along with the morning stars and all the heavenly beings.

Let us pray: God of unchangeable power, when you fashioned the world the morning stars sang together and the host of heaven shouted for joy. Open our eyes to the wonders of creation and teach us to use all things for good, to the honor of your glorious name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.