



**From the Pulpit: June 9, 2024**

Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

**The Reverend Christine V. Hides**

Psalm 8

***God After...III: God after Copernicus***

This summer Bill, Katie, and I are preaching a series titled, “God after...” inspired by Professor John Haught’s books *God After Darwin* and *God After Einstein* in which we consider how Christian theology has been shaped or reshaped by scientific discoveries. Today’s story involves banned books, an arrogant but brilliant scientific mind, and the fragile ego of a world leader insulted in the media.

Of course I’m speaking about Galileo Galilei whose telescope made visible the heliocentric, or sun centered theory of the universe put forth by his mathematical predecessor Nicolaus Copernicus. Their discovery that the sun didn’t revolve around the earth birthed the Scientific Revolution. Against the backdrop of the Protestant Reformation and the resulting Catholic Counter Reformation, their work also launched a complex dispute about authority, interpretation of Scripture, scientific discovery, and church doctrine.

“What is  
humanity’s  
place in the  
universe?”

Psalm 8 is our scripture reading today because it has been called a “psalm for stargazers.”<sup>1</sup> Did you notice the way the psalmist words move us from the heavens above down to the depths of the sea? At the heart of the poem lies a central question, the same question which Buzz Aldrin asked the night before returning to earth from the Apollo 11 mission: “When I look at the sky, which you have made, the moon and the stars which you set in their places—what is man that you think of him?”<sup>2</sup>

Maybe you have experienced this kind of wonder, awe and curiosity? Did you travel to see April’s total eclipse or run outside to catch a glimpse of the aurora borealis a few weeks ago? Maybe you have laid on the ground in some dark wilderness and traced the wisps of the Milky Way across the sky?

As a teen I used to retreat to the dock that jutted out from our rural yard into a small lake. On summer nights I would lie on my back and look up at the stars, marveling at the unimaginable prospect of infinity, which made me feel dizzily awestruck. One night my stepfather joined me and shined a flashlight into the dark water. Mesmerized, we watched a galaxy of tiny water creatures swarming, spiraling and orbiting the light. It is there in that place between the starry heavens above and the microscopic living constellations below that I began to wonder about the relationship between science and faith. It was then I experienced the kind of deep praise that envelops Psalm 8, “O Lord, how majestic!”

*O Lord, our Sovereign,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!  
You have set your glory above the heavens.  
Out of the mouths of babes and infants  
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,  
to silence the enemy and the avenger.  
When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars that you have established;  
what are humans that you are mindful of them,  
mortals that you care for them?  
Yet you have made them a little lower than God  
and crowned them with glory and honor.  
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;  
you have put all things under their feet,  
all sheep and oxen,  
and also the beasts of the field,  
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,  
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.  
O Lord, our Sovereign,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

<sup>1</sup>Limburg quoted in Nancy L. deClaisse-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 120.

<sup>2</sup>Museums for Digital Learning, “Bible and the First Lunar Landing – Apollo XI,” accessed June 9, 2024, <https://museumsfordigitalllearning.org/resourcekit/98/slideshow/481>.

Psalm 8 is a poem that sings of a relationship with God in which humility and inquiry go hand in hand. Yes, we are lower than God but, also given responsibility for things here on earth. We are given the gift of reason that enables us to ask the question that echoes through history: “What is humanity’s place in the universe?”

In the sixteenth century the church said “earth” and therefore humanity is at the center. Don’t you see the sun rising, moving across the sky, and setting each day? Nicolaus Copernicus was a priest who outlined a heliocentric theory of the universe in 1515.

Though he was not the first to propose a sun-centered astronomical system, he developed mathematical techniques that made it substantially equivalent to the geocentric model that dated back to Aristotle. Perhaps because he was still working out the math, or perhaps because he feared the church’s response, he delayed publication of his book *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* until 1543, which happens to be the year of his death.

Other than a passing comment from Protestant Reformer Martin Luther, his fear of church backlash did not materialize. Upon the “mention of a certain new [unnamed] astrologer who wanted to prove that the earth moves and not the sky, the sun, and the moon...” Luther said “I believe the Holy Scriptures, for Joshua commanded the sun to stand still, and not the earth.”<sup>3</sup>

In the academic world Copernicus was known to great minds like Kepler and Galileo. Inspired by new Dutch technology, Galileo practiced the art of lens grinding, initially to assist sailors. With a meager 3x magnification he showed the military that from the towers of Venice one could use a spyglass to see a ship coming on the horizon hours earlier than with the naked eye. It was a Shark Tank Moment that earned him a lifetime pension. The year was 1609 and Galileo was 45 years old. Just six months later he improved his telescope and turned it heavenward. In a flurry of stargazing he witnessed the moon’s texture, spots on the sun, and the four moons of Jupiter. A month or so later he published his best seller, *The Starry Messenger*.

Naming Jupiter’s moons the “Medicean Stars” earned him the patronage of the Grand Duke of Tuscany. At the urging of a student, Galileo looks for something similar to moon phases on Venus. And there it was, visible evidence of the Copernican System—Venus revolves around the sun.

News of his observations began to spread among clerics and academics, but Galileo felt safe, smug even, under the protection of the Grand Duke. However the Duke’s mother, the Grand Duchess Christina had some questions. At one of her power brunches she asked a student of Galileo to explain how this theory could be true given the story from the book of Joshua from the Hebrew Bible. Just like Martin Luther, she read that in chapter ten, Joshua commands the sun—**not the earth**—to stand still to have more hours of daylight to do battle at Gibeon. Is Galileo contradicting the Holy Scriptures?

“And there it was, visible evidence of the Copernican System—Venus revolves around the sun.”

Galileo responds to the Grand Duchess with a long letter. He says something like, God has given us two books: the Book of Scripture and the Book of Nature. Scripture must be true. If science seems to suggest otherwise, then the interpreter of scripture must have made a mistake. Scripture must accommodate nature because he says, the purpose of the Holy Bible is to “teach us how one goes to heaven, not how heaven goes.”<sup>4</sup>

The letter circulates quickly. Arrogantly Galileo believes he can convince the Church and its inquisitors that their interpretation of scripture is flawed. Unfortunately for Galileo the Protestant Reformation left the Catholic Church with little tolerance for debate. The inquiry resulted in the ban of Copernicus’ book in 1616—more than 70 years after it was published. Teaching that the earth orbits around the

sun was officially made heresy.

But there was a loophole! When his good friend becomes Pope Urban VIII, Galileo believes he is allowed to talk about the sun-centered theory, as long as he does so “hypothetically.” So Galileo writes a literary work in which three fictional characters discuss the Copernican System. Near the end Simplicio the fool says something like, “the works of God can be beyond human understanding.” It sounds reasonable doesn’t it?

The problem is that these were the Pope’s words. When Galileo has the simpleton speak them, it is a serious insult. Enraged, Pope Urban convenes a commission.

“What is our place in the universe?” Is the question Galileo was forced to answer in June 1633 when he was “vehemently suspected of heresy” by the Roman Inquisition. “I, Galileo...touching with my hands the Holy Gospels, swear that I have always believed, do believe, and by God’s help will in the future believe, all that is held, preached, and taught by the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. ...I must altogether abandon the **false** opin-

<sup>3</sup>Richard W. Pogge, “Some Notes on the Theological Response to

Copernicus,” *Department of Astronomy, The Ohio State University*, last modified February 16, 2006, <https://www.astronomy.ohio-state.edu/pogge.1/Essays/Copernic.html>.

<sup>4</sup>Grand Duchess Christina

ion that the sun is the center of the world and immovable.”<sup>5</sup> Aware of the Inquisition’s torturous tendencies, Galileo publicly recants his life’s work.

It will take two centuries for the Catholic Church to lift the ban on Copernican beliefs. In 1992, 359 years after his trial, Galileo was officially cleared of wrongdoing by the Vatican.

Today the Vatican has an astronomer, Brother Guy Consolmagno, who speaks often about the relationship between scripture and science. He says, “[texts about creation] had to be written in a poetic way because science keeps changing. ...The biggest advantage of being a scientist who has faith is that it keeps you centered on why you are doing this. Science should be for the glory of God. ...My scientific work has made me recognize the joy that comes from being close to God.”<sup>6</sup>

“What are mortals that you are mindful of them, O God?” is a question that sits literally on the surface of the moon. Pope Paul VI submitted the entire text of Psalm 8 to NASA who inscribed it microscopically on a silicon disk for the Apollo 11 mission. Buzz Aldrin almost forgot to leave the little metal container that had been placed in his sleeve pocket. But after two and a half hours walking on the lunar surface, with one hand on the ladder to depart, Aldrin dropped the disk, rather unceremoniously, into the Sea of Tranquility where it remains to this day.

“In 1992, 359 years after his trial, Galileo was officially cleared of wrongdoing by the Vatican.”

There are more than seventy-two other greetings from world leaders on that disk including this one from the then President of Vietnam which I will leave you with today:

*This memorable feat should bring to mankind both a sense of pride and humility: pride, because human beings by their intelligence and perseverance are now able to get beyond this earth to which they seemed to be bound; humility, because the quarrels which divide men on the earth look so petty in the context of our vast universe.*

*In this historical event, we prayerfully hope that the ingenuity and intelligence which God endows to men will lead toward increasing progress and brotherhood, and the widening of human horizon.<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup>University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law. “Galileo: The Recantation.” Famous Trials. <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/galileo/recantation.html> (accessed June 9, 2024).

<sup>6</sup>EWTN Global Catholic Network, “The Pope’s Astronomer: Meet Br. Guy Consolmagno,” YouTube video, 2022, <https://youtu.be/o3eqYbKVY-C0?si=tyRINVbrmdgc-BXc>.

<sup>7</sup>“Memento from the Moon: Some of What We’ve Left Behind,” National Air and Space Museum, <https://airandspace.si.edu/stories/editorial/memento-moon-some-what-weve-left-behind> (accessed June 9, 2024).

## —Prayers of the People— Squire Prince

Great Moving Spirit,

The one who created the stars and the sky; the one who placed the sun where it is to warm the waters; and who called the waters to trickle down from the sky to bring life to all plants and vegetation; and who painted the flowers in the fields, that they may all be for us beauty and hymn songs of joy. As the cicadas around us sing their love song to each other, so does creation sing your love song to us. With each new flower that buds, and with each tree that flourishes, it all sings of your love for us. Let us not be so quick in our need to be productive, that we miss the ways in which you whisper to us through your creation. With the ways in which you tell the stars at night to dance around us, and shine lights into the holiness of night. How majestic is your creation O God, how majestic is your name!

We come before you this day, bringing all of who we are before you. Bearing with us our celebrations and our grievances. We bring those ways in which our hearts are leaping with joy, and the ways they are breaking down in despair. We bring this before you because we know that you hold our tender hearts, and the love and care you shower over them is the only thing that can bring us healing, renewal, and wholeness. We come before you, and bring to your altar ourselves; unfiltered, and unashamed, asking for help. O God, be for us peace; that surpasses all understanding, be for us joy; that makes us dance in our seats, and be for us strength; to just make it through the next step. Lord, there are some who are walking in a season of grief, and we ask that you be for them comfort and grace. For the family of Betsey Puth, we pray that you cover them in a blanket of love.

Be for them strength to make it through the day, and bring to their memories the moments of love, laughter, and joy. And as we celebrate the fullness of life, we also know and celebrate with those who are watching life only just begin to bloom. We thank you Lord for the births of Rory James, William McCarthy, Olive Jane, and we thank you Lord for the beauty of baptism as we welcome into our fold Cameron Lee and Lachlan Dean. Lord, may these precious souls begin to see your face in all of us, and may we see you in their laughter, their cries, and their smile. Lord, let all of our prayers be heard, and all of our lives be light.

Lord, we dare to ask for those lives around us. We pray for your beloved in Gaza, whose lives are daily suffocated by the fear of war and violence. May there be peace that flows like a mighty rushing spring. For your beloved in the Ukraine, we ask that you would intervene, and flow into the hardened hearts of those leaders, that they may do what they can to care for all life and flourishing. For all places riddled with fear and pain, we pray that your Spirit of life, light, and love would prevail, and soften the hearts of all, that we may begin to see one another, not as enemies, but as neighbors, friends, siblings of humanity, that we may share in this life together.

This time of year, we are reminded of the divine call to love, and to love unconditionally. Help open our eyes, that we may see in each other, your Divine Spirit. May we see in our neighbor, not only their humanity, and their beauty, but also your great presence in their lives. May we be able to look in each other's eyes, and see, feel, and express nothing but love. And then we can all join in together in saying that great prayer that Jesus taught us, by saying....

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