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Wednesday December 3, 2014

Who owns the stars?

By Jim Taylor

When I walk the dog on a winter night, the stars overhead gleam and glitter like sequins on a ball gown. Their brilliance is not dimmed by street lights, or by processions of car headlights brushing the darkness off a highway.

The stars make me feel humble. I think of the traditional line from Psalm 8: “What is man, that thou art mindful of him?”

I tilt my head back and trace the paths of the stars. The great arc of the Big Dipper’s handle. The two stars in its bucket that point to Polaris, the North Star. Cassiopea lounging on the Milky Way, the hem of her robe trailing down towards the diamond bracelet cluster of the Pleiades...

And it’s all... utter..... self-delusion.....

The Big Dipper does not point at the North Star. If we could line up behind those two stars, they’d probably point into some vast abyss in space, nowhere near Polaris. The stars of the handle do not form an arc.

Except from one viewpoint, this insignificant planet we call Earth.

Looking at the past

The stars we see today are not even in the same places they were 25 centuries ago, when the first star charts were created.

We haven’t learned a thing from Copernicus and Galileo 400 years ago. We still think of ourselves as the centre of the universe. We still believe that everything revolves around us.

Not if you ask that question directly, of course. We would all affirm that we live on a small rocky planet in a solar system circling around a relatively

small star on the outskirts of a minor galaxy that's drifting through a fabric of space-time warped by gravity.

But we still think that the stars are set in their places for our benefit.

The nearest star is Alpha Centauri, about 4.4 light years away. The most distant single star we can see is Deneb, about 4,000 light years away. The most distant object visible to naked eye is probably the Andromeda galaxy, an estimated 2.5 million light years away.

We have no way of knowing if Andromeda (or Alpha Centauri, for that matter) still exists. Andromeda could have exploded into a supernova – or collapsed into a black hole – 2 million years ago. And we wouldn't know about it for another 500,000 years -- if human beings survive that long.

I doubt if Andromeda will care whether we do or don't. Especially since it would take 2.5 million years for Andromedans to discover that we exist.

Yet we believe that stars that may not even be there anymore were arranged so we could interpret their patterns as a daily horoscope?

An ego-centric species

Only an utterly ego-centric species could convince itself that the universe came into being so that we could look out at it from one isolated perspective.

Psalms 8 goes on to contradict its earlier humility. It tells God (in the wording of the 1611 King James version), "Yet Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels..."

I'm not sure God deserves that credit. We made ourselves a little lower than the angels. We'd probably make ourselves greater than the angels, if we thought we could get away with it.

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YOUR TURN

Lots of affirmation about last week's column. Vern Ratzlaff wrote, "A wonderfully evocative piece, appreciated by this Anabaptist." And Wayne Irwin, "Thank you, Jim. We are all still students of the great Mystery."

Tom Watson looked back "My sense is that some, perhaps many, people have

given up on church because they thought they had to believe everything in order to be there.

“Over the years in ministry I conducted a good number of Confirmation classes. On only two occasions did a teenager have the courage to discontinue the classes because he -- yes, on both occasions they were male -- just couldn't go through with it. Neither, to the best of my knowledge, ever darkened the doors of a church again. Although, to be honest, the vast majority of those who did finish the classes and were confirmed, never came back again either. You hit the nail on the head...Confirmation wasn't only a graduation from Sunday school, it was a graduation from church, period.

“What I value from the Confirmation classes I led were the relationships formed with the young people in them. We often had a lot of fun. One memorable incident stands out in my mind. I asked those in the class, "What are some things you just don't do?" Everybody sat there looking blank, and then finally one high-spirited, delightful young woman said, quizzically, "You don't fart at the dinner table?" Kinda did it for that class!”

Ginny Adams mused, “How many times have we clergy heard that story -- if you have rats in your church building, just confirm them and you'll never see them again. Even those of us who follow the ‘believer's baptism’ rites find the same thing -- baptize a person as part of growing past childhood into adulthood and you'll move them out of the church.

“The real question is, what are we to do about this?”

Laurna Tallman offered her reflections: “In a world in which certain kinds of information have proliferated but the means of ordering, comparing, and evaluating that information have not, the teaching of the young raises new challenges to parents and teachers and pastors. What many of us taught our kids has to some extent become outmoded since we taught it...

“One of the most useful kinds of information in the Bible pertains to its age: human nature has not changed over the millennia that small library encompasses. Intellectual approaches to the Bible have fluctuated and have grown in various ways; the study of those viewpoints is revealing of human nature, too.

“Another of the useful kinds of information in the Bible pertains to the interactions of humans with the force or forces they call ‘God. If we are to contribute to the cumulative knowledge of God the Creator (science) and God the Father (religion) we do well to study those books preserved through the

ages as fundamental texts of discovery and learning. We need to see that the ancient notions of the nature of God and of man were changing, [even] within the Biblical time framework. For example, the story of Abraham's attempt at child sacrifice with his son Isaac was altered by the timely appearance of an animal that Abraham seized on as an alternative. The teachings of Jesus affirmed that history in some ways and took it to a whole new level in others.

"All any of us can do is exactly what you did for your son: to report on the current state of the art in understanding and using that infinite resource to help in the ongoing work of ordering, comparing, and evaluating new (scientific) information."

Dru Tyler had thoughts on several items: "Many years ago in Florida, when I turned 8, the Presbyterian minister sent me a letter about joining the church (code for Confirmation in the deep Protestant communities). The Baptists had believers baptism at 8 there then. When I started ministry in New York City all 13 year olds -- Protestants, Roman Catholic, and Jewish -- had some religious ceremony of confirmation, profession of faith, or bar/bat mitzvah.

"Second, it seems to me in telling your son that he could work with both systems did give him permission to take his questions seriously.

"Third, I didn't realize that people up your way are feeling some of the same trepidation about the Canadian government that so many of us feel about the U S. That is sad. Maybe we should find ways to hold each other up.

"Fourth, the Legion. It took WW2 and Korean vets a long time for them and Vietnam vets to understand one another. Warfare had changed a lot, and common ground was hard to find. I hope we can keep on working toward peace rather than chewing up our children in battles."

Patricia Brush commented about the comments on sexual harassment: "I was surprised (but maybe I shouldn't have been) by the number of responders who are sure that sexual harassment is the woman's fault and that it depends upon women's mood swings. Rape culture lives.

"Sexual harassment exists whether or not the women report it. Sexual harassment can be one violating incident (which can also be called sexual assault) or it can be a campaign of belittling or disgusting remarks and/or unwanted touching. In the workplace, women often put up with it, because the abuser is senior and her job could be on the line, until the harm being done to her outweighs the risk of job loss. This is not called a mood swing, it is systematic torture until the breaking point is reached.

“Ending sexual harassment is not the responsibility of the victim. Harassers need to be retrained. Our messed up society has instructed them that some people are of lesser value and are fair game.

“But really, what it comes down to is ‘Love your neighbour’. If you wouldn't want someone to do it to you, don't do it to someone else.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

Psalm 85, as a whole, laments that God seems to have turned away -- even if not all of those verses are included in the reading for Advent 2. My friend Howard Zurbrigg contracted AIDS from a blood transfusion for hepatitis while in Haiti serving the Canadian Bible Society.

1 Pious voices utter platitudes: "Trust in the Lord. It's God's will. God knows best."

**2 People say with certainty: "The Lord gives, and the Lord taketh away."
"With faith, all things are possible."**

8 "Silence!" I want to cry.

"Take your frozen formulas and leave me alone!

Let me listen for what God has to say.

9 For God will not let a broken heart bleed by itself in the night.

10 When wounds cut to the bone, only God can sew together the torn edges of a shattered life.

Only God can soothe such throbbing pain."

11 Surely goodness and mercy will grow again, and sunshine return to the sky.

12 Sorrow is holy ground;

walk on it only with feet bared to the pain of every pebble.

13 Through the darkness, the Lord comes walking on the salt sea of tears.

For paraphrases of most of the psalms used by the Revised Common Lectionary, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publishing, info@woodlake.com.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at jimt@quixotic.ca, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
