

Sermon: Year A, Proper 4

Texts: Genesis 12:1-9

Romans 4:13-25

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

In the service of Evening Prayer, appointed by our Prayer Book to be read each and every night, the opening sentences (listed on page 115 if you'd like to reacquaint yourself with them) include this beautiful instruction: "Seek him who made the Pleiades and Orion, and turns deep darkness into the morning, and darkens the day into night... The Lord is his name." This is a particularly evocative invitation when it is read at dusk, at the literal turning of the day, in that short span of time when darkness silently creeps in, deepening the hues of the sky – and yet enough light remains to hide, for just a little while still, the emerging stars.

"Seek him who made the Pleiades and Orion:" it is, of course, a statement about God – God in the cosmic sense, or, as we say altogether too nonchalantly, God the *Creator*, the one who in deep mystery began and upholds the vast expanse of our universe and grants us and keeps our lives. Too many misguided battles about creationism and evolution have tainted this title for God, binding it, on both sides of the debate, in a stiff and shallow fundamentalism, stripping the creation of its enthrallment and its even more fundamental and marvelous inscrutability. What we are left with, then, is merely the vague and predictable idea that God, being God, being the Creator, must be big or powerful or, as has recently been venomously denied, great – terms that, in our use of them, tend to make God seem only dull and static and flat.

But this opening sentence is not simply declarative, as if it sets before us something about God that is already obvious or presumed. It's an imperative. It puts before us a command that requires our active response. The task is not merely to concede with aloof abstraction that God somehow got everything started. We are, rather, being instructed to do something dynamic and intensely investigative. We are told to seek, and to seek specifically the God who established even the stars in their constellations. What does this entail?

With the Advent of Google, the physical facts are easy to quote, with relative dispassion. The Pleiades are a cluster of hundreds of stars, probably about 100 million years old, located roughly 425 light years from our sun. One light year is approximately 5.9 trillion miles. I'll let you do the rest of the math and figure the distance. The constellation Orion includes the star Betelgeuse, a red giant. If it replaced our sun, the diameter of the star would extend beyond the orbit of the planet Jupiter. The astronomy is impressive. But what is additionally required of us, what we are invited to contemplate beyond measures and substance alone, is the dimension of God's pleasure that is revealed in the glittering lights of distant galaxies. The most important words from the creation account in Genesis, continually repeated after each new development, are the words that declare that God's ordering of the chaos was good and good and very good. From the very moment of its inception, our world is subject to verdict. It makes sense, within it, to assess value and meaning – not just locally, not just within the very small limits of our lives, of our own desires for goodness and justice or just plain survival, but also, all the way out to the farthest reaches of space. The Pleiades and Orion tell us something essential about God. They stand witness to the sheer enormity of God's delight, made materially evident. And thus, whenever we think of God, we are instructed to imagine, at very least, the one for whom the Pleiades and

Orion are as much a work of art as they are a consequence of chemistry. When you seek God, seek him for whom the Pleiades and Orion stand as a testament to the magnanimity of joy and love and grace made physically present by God's own will and spirit.

When you think of God, do you imagine God in the full richness of this one single sentence? Do you seek after the God of majestic creating and yearn to prayerfully stretch your own perceptions beyond the convenient definitions by which we talk in much smaller terms – reducing the universe to a blind accident and reducing faith to talk of my god and your god, the god that fits my liking and the god that is limited to our own understanding and our own ability to justify or defend or prove? If you search the night sky, the God made evident there, in fascination, is remarkably different than the one so much more in vogue today – who is said to promise petty things – gaudy wealth and personal success and the happiness of providing you all that you could want in exchange for a little bit of worship and confession.

Recovering a lively sense of precisely this instruction is important if we want to understand Paul's explication of the righteousness of God, part of which we have heard this morning in the Epistle lesson. Here, too, and often egregiously, we tend to make God small (as suits us), assuming that God's function is to be the final arbiter of what is good and what is bad, in the end judging who will be deemed worthy and who will be condemned. There is no lack of battles and squabbles about right and wrong either in life or in religion. What Paul declares, however, is that God's righteousness is far more radical than we usually suppose. God is not interested in all the pedestrian judgments we make against one another, by which we try to boast of ourselves as we deride others. The whole point of the law, given by God in covenant, is to show that no one can lay claim to adequate goodness, none of us can stand justified and claim that we are somehow better and deserve greater honor. The law fatally undercuts all of us. It's depth defies clear measure. Listen to these words with the acuteness they deserve: "For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God; they [we] are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

This extraordinary pronouncement is often as distant from our lives and actions as the Pleiades and Orion are distant from our sun – by hundreds of trillions of miles, by a distance that is nearly impossible for us to imagine. Still, ignoring Paul, we think of the church as an arm of judgment. Still, ignoring Paul, we think of the church as an institution whose chief role is to uphold standards of right and wrong, as a community of the saved that holds itself in distinction from those considered to be damned or, at least, in dire threat of disaster. We consider ourselves pretty good people. The facts of our lives bear out our basic responsibility and civility. We follow the rules. We earn respect. We contribute to the needs of others, to a reasonable degree. We're Episcopalians. And so, we are able, with some degree of pride, even before God, to stand on our own two feet. Which is to claim our own righteousness. Which is to have no real need for God's.

God's righteousness, however, is like God's creating. It isn't a matter of bare fact, a reduction of love to either chemistry or, in righteousness, to law. God's righteousness is the mystery of God's pleasure, too, which exceeds both physical and moral limits. The Gospel, simply stated, is God's delight in making all things new, gathering all of creation into reconciliation, in the end, surprising us, infinitely, by a generosity that has no boundary, in time, in space or in divisive judgment.

The work of the church, then – and for all of us as Christians – is to recover and unabashedly hallow the mystery of God: the mystery resident in creation itself, in spite of all the voices that insist that total explanation is within our reach and that facts show no value; and the mystery of even greater proportion, revealed in Jesus Christ, when God, in God's righteousness, chose to establish peace not by means of power and judgments imposed against us, but by means of mercy, forgiveness, and resurrection.

There are very few people now who, looking at the church and seeing its faith, are fascinated – probably because God often isn't that great for any of us either, neither in creation nor in the light of righteousness. We bemoan. We decry. Rarely, however, do we stretch far enough to embody and thus to offer others a vision of the immensity of God's passion in creation and in re-creation too. Matthew reports that Jesus astounded those who heard him. They thought he had authority unlike all others, who, in comparison, seemed to be mere bureaucrats. He enthralled those around him by revealing the mystery of love, tangibly, personally, infinitely. If we want to take Christ's name, then our reach should be no less in yearning. "Seek him who made the Pleiades and Orion... who turns deep darkness into morning."

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