

October 22, 1972
Psalm 73:1; 21-28 (N.E.)
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THE TENTH PLANET

I am often amazed at the narrow range of interests possessed by some of the people I happen to meet. That interest sometimes appears to go no further than their home or their business. They live in a vast and complicated universe but it seems to mean nothing to them. Some are so provincial they care little or nothing about what is going on in their own neighborhood, not to mention what goes on in the community as a whole, the nation, the earth on which they live, or in the tremendous reaches of outer space.

It has always seemed to me unfortunate that so many men and women have such a miniscule interest in the terrestrial and the celestial environment in which they live. We are in a fascinating and indescribably large universe which is full of mystery and miracle. It seems almost a waste of human life and resources not to be appreciative and inquisitive about it. I recognize that we all have different interests and concerns, but I for one must occasionally get away from the urban jungle and go out into open country where I can see the manifest works of the Creator relatively untouched and unspoiled by the grasping and greedy fingers of man. It stimulates questions and sometimes suggests answers.

There is a point to this morning's sermon, but before we get to it let me take you on an imaginary journey into outer space. Some indication of how far we may be going is suggested by a cosmic explosion which man first became aware of in 1963, and which took place 60 billion billion miles from earth. The light the astronomers were able to see in 1963 started traveling toward the earth 10 million years ago and has been traveling 6 trillion miles per year during all of that time--6 trillion miles per year for 10 million years! The event was the explosion of an entire galaxy dubbed by the astronomers as M-82. (1). Such a galactic explosion is the most stupendous natural event known to man.

Let us then get ready for our journey into this vastness of space by mounting a beam of light which, as every schoolchild knows, travels at the rate of 186,000 miles per second. We take off and in eight minutes we pass the sun, 93 million miles away. If we desire to examine Saturn and its rings we will get there in about an hour. To go to the solar system's most distant planet, Pluto, will take us about five and a half hours.

As the saying goes, all of this is small potatoes. Let us now travel on to the star nearest earth, Proxima Centauri. It will take us four years and four months to get there, and remember we are traveling at the rate of 6 trillion miles per year. If we prefer to go to the North star which is more familiar to us all, it will take us about 460 years.

(1) Space Digest, Dec. 1963, p. 60

Our sun is only one relatively small star in the Milky Way galaxy, a galaxy composed of billions of such suns. If we desire to travel from one end of that galaxy to the other we will have to allot 120,000 years. We'd better pack a big lunch! If we desire rather to see the nearest galaxy beyond our own it will take us 200,000 years.

Here are a few interesting facts for you to remember so that when you return from your vast journey into space and sit in your living room showing the slides of the trip to your neighbors you will appear to be a well-informed traveler. There are about 100 billion stars in the Milky Way. The total number of stars in the universe is estimated by some experts to be about 1000 billion billion. In spite of all this, space is uncrowded to the point of desolation. You won't have to give much concern to running into something accidentally. There is no traffic jam in outer space. (2)

You might also wish to know that Dr. Frank Drake, director of the National Astronomy and Ionosphere Council at Cornell University, estimates that there is a 100% chance of intelligent life existing elsewhere in our universe, and the chances are that if we discover such life it will be far advanced over our own.

To follow up what we have been talking about in the last two sermons, if you are a religious person you might like to quote Dr. Paul Klopsteg, past president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, who ascribes the beginning of the universe "to a Being of infinite wisdom and power". Says Dr. Klopsteg:

"Attribute whatever qualities you wish to such a Being. The concept goes way beyond understanding. Nevertheless it gives the only satisfactory explanation that my reason can accept, yet it remains an unfathomable mystery." (3)

II

Now all of that is only an introduction to what we really want to talk about this morning. Astronomy fascinates and excites me and when someone has something that fascinates and excites him he must share it with others. What we have been talking about is not entirely irrelevant to our main thesis.

Again, as some of you know, the ninth planet in our solar system, called Pluto, was discovered because Percival Lowell detected peculiar and mysterious movements in the orbit of the eighth planet, Uranus. Those movements are referred to by astronomers as perturbations.

Now here is the exciting astronomical news of our day: There are perturbations in the orbit of Halley's Comet which suggest the possibility of another distant planet out beyond the orbit of Pluto.(4) There is, in short, the possibility of a tenth planet in our solar system.

(2) See National Wildlife Magazine, Oct. 1972, p.50

(3) Chicago Tribune, Dec. 31, 1961 (4) Science News, Vol. 102, p. 248

Now, believe it or not, we have arrived at the point of the sermon. There is such a thing as the law of cause and effect; there are actions and consequences, and there is no such thing as chance or accident. These laws or principles which have existed so long that the memory and record of man knoweth not to the contrary, exist not only in the physical world, they exist in the spiritual and moral world as well.

Men came to believe in the existence of Pluto because they saw its effect on Uranus. Some men believe there may be a tenth planet because of some effects they have observed in the orbit of Halley's Comet. I believe in God for many reasons, but not the least of them is that I see the effects of His existence in the natural world in which I live and in the men and women who tell me they have known Him. His existence, his influence, causes perturbations in the life of man. God can be known by the consequences of his being.

III

We make a big mistake in religion, it seems to me, when we talk about rewards and punishments. God doesn't punish people for being bad. He doesn't reward them for being good. God has revealed His will to men in many different ways. He says to us over and over again in history,

"Here are two ways. One is good; walk in it and you will have life and happiness and fulfillment. The other way is evil; walk in it and you will have pain and sorrow and littleness of life. The choice is yours."

There is no punishment if you walk in the evil way; there are only consequences which have already been foretold. There are no rewards if you walk in the righteous way; there are only consequences which have already been foretold. The consequences have always been there. God does not send them; you and I choose them. They have existed since that time when man was only a thought in the mind of the Creator.

Whatever kind of life you choose to live, it will cause perturbations in the lives of others, particularly, of course, in the lives of your children. You affect them for good or for ill, and if your way of life affects them adversely and they suffer the consequences, don't blaspheme and cry out that God is punishing them or you. You got what you bargained for. You made a choice. Unfortunately in a world where we must all live together, the innocent often suffer with the guilty, and it is true that the sins of the fathers are often visited upon the children to the third and fourth generation.

IV

There is one question which remains unanswered: What about the evil men and women who seem to prosper, and the good men and women who seem to suffer? Yes, that is an exceedingly important question. But remember, God is unlimited by time. You and I have a very limited vision. We see only what happens within a very short span of years. In the short run the evil may prosper. In the short run the good may suffer. But in God's good time, which is all of eternity, things will be different. There the consequences of evil are always evil, and the consequences of good are always good.

The vastness of the universe we have spoken of this morning should surely remind us that God is not a finite being limited by space and time. And if he made us, as I surely believe he did, he is not through with us when our few short years on earth are spent. In that eternity which lies beyond this earthly existence those consequences we mentioned go flowing on.

So I suggest and admonish each one of us to follow the example of the Psalmist in his awareness of and commitment to the Beyond that is beyond who is also the Beyond that is within:

"My chief good is to be near Thee, O God;
I have chosen Thee, Lord God, to be my refuge." (5)