

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

June 29, 2025

Earth: Our Home

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: June 29, 2025

We can trace a line of thought from the ancient Greeks to indigenous cultures in far flung places of the way people began to speak of creation in four aspects: earth, water, wind/air, and fire. The words and origin stories differed, but the elements appear consistently.

Across these many traditions, people also imagined polytheistic divine powers in control. One deity rules water while another god exerts dominion over wind/air. Myths abound of these divine agents, with notorious personalities and whose bickering with one another inflicts disastrous chaos upon humanity.

Our faith bows before the one God as ruler of all creation. The stories, poetry, and prophecy from scripture point to God simply speaking these elements in creation and deftly employing them in miracles.

We call them miracles because God's power defies human imagination to part the seas, rain down fire, or speak in the wind's silence.

Today we begin with the earth and of our place in God's creation.

Our psalter reading echoes the creation story of Genesis and the wisdom from the prophets.

Creator God, we take for granted the ground beneath our feet and the wonder of the cosmos in which you placed us. Silence the noise around. Humble us. Let us be in awe of your creation and joyful for your complete authority of all. Amen.

Psalm 33

⁶ By the word of the LORD the heavens were made
and all their host by the breath of his mouth.

⁷ He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle;
he put the deeps in storehouses.

⁸ Let all the earth fear the LORD;
let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him,

⁹ for he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm.

¹⁰ The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing;
he frustrates the plans of the peoples.

¹¹ The counsel of the LORD stands forever,
the thoughts of his heart to all generations.

¹² Happy is the nation whose God is the LORD,
the people whom he has chosen as his heritage.

¹³ The LORD looks down from heaven;
he sees all humankind.

¹⁴ From where he sits enthroned he watches
all the inhabitants of the earth—

¹⁵ he who fashions the hearts of them all
and observes all their deeds.

¹⁶ A king is not saved by his great army;
a warrior is not delivered by his great strength.

¹⁷ The war horse is a vain hope for victory,
and by its great might it cannot save.

¹⁸ Truly the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him,
on those who hope in his steadfast love,

¹⁹ to deliver their soul from death
and to keep them alive in famine.

²⁰ Our soul waits for the LORD;
he is our help and shield.

²¹ Our heart is glad in him
because we trust in his holy name.

²² Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us,
even as we hope in you.

If you escape this summer to a remote beach or mountains
top, you may be able to gaze at the night sky without city

lights distorting your view. Even the naked eye can easily discern planets deep in space.

I'll never understand how the ancients connected the stars with make-believe lines to see rams or bulls or crabs dancing through the skies. But they did. Ancient astrologers anticipated the retrogrades and eclipses of these heavenly bodies to influence our personalities, stimulate romantic lives, or thwart progress.

Since the dawn of time, humans conjured ideas of the cosmos and our home we call earth. Was it hubris or immaturity that placed earth at the center?

Even though other planets were round, our narrow thinking led us to believe that if we sailed to the horizon we'd fall off since, of course, the earth was flat.

As our mathematics and optical powers evolved, new ideas emerged.

In 1543 that understanding of the heavens and earth began to fall apart. Copernicus had the audacity to suggest the earth was one of many planets revolving around the sun. He argued that we simply are not the center of the universe.

As expected, his published scientific discoveries and mathematical proofs provoked backlash from the church fathers who spent the next century trying to refute them.

We tend to think that not only are we at the center of it all, but we try to control what others understand, which leads us to battle over who is in control.

Does it enhance or diminish our self-worth to know we are merely bit players in time and place within God's grand design?

The psalmist exhibits a maturity that far exceeds the church fathers from the "enlightenment era" who dismissed Copernicus and one hundred years later put Galileo on trial.

Although we did not read the opening lines, the psalmist begins the poem by assembling a full choir and orchestra into a harmony to "praise the lord...praise befits" the lord.

In humility, the psalmist knows that it takes all of creation, with all our myriad gifts, to praise God. No single voice is sufficient, particularly since by God's word alone, **the heavens and earth were made.**

(Here's an alert for other Bible nerds – when God speaks creation into being, as recorded in Genesis or elsewhere, the writers always link earth and heavens together. Whether in

faith or science, a big bang theory or something more poetic yet to be discovered, God conceives of earth as a part of the heavenly realm.)

Then the psalmist pivots to our age-old human tendencies to turn our gaze downward, towards ourselves.

When the world becomes too large to comprehend, our insecurity rises, and we become small minded. We don't like not being God or we tend to lose our faith in God. Such vulnerability drives us to entrust ourselves to nations and construct borders to protect us from someone or something more powerful.

These nations seek to defend: my home, my stuff, my people. We need kings, and war horses, and armies for defensive strategies.

The psalmist knows this fatal condition of the heart — fear. The heart that fears (fill in the blank of perceived enemies next door or in distant lands) hopes in defense mechanisms to keep bad out and good in.

Notice in this Psalm, the writer never differentiates between the Israelite people and other nations. The psalmist calls all

the people of God – to a different heart condition – fear, yes, but fear as in “awe” of God.¹

When God looks down at the earth from the heavens, God seeks the welfare of all people. God only desires for wars to end. Abundance to prevail. Humanity to flourish. Praising God and trusting God rather than ourselves is an act of courage: **God, alone, will deliver souls from death.**

Walter Brueggemann, preeminent scholar of the bible and human behavior who died earlier this month, wrote: Psalm 33 is “a powerful antidote to every temptation to autonomy and self-sufficiency.”²

To drive home the point, the editors who compiled the Book of Psalms millennia ago placed a psalm of humility immediately after this praise of creation. In Psalm 34, in the face of certain destruction, King David bows before God with the words:

I sought the Lord and He answered me,
and from all that I dreaded he saved me. (Psalm 34:6).

¹ Casey Thornburgh Sigmon, “commentary on Psalm 33:12-22,” *Working Preacher*. August 11, 2019, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-19-3/commentary-on-psalm-3312-22-4>

² Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger, *Psalms* (New Cambridge Bible Commentary; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 165.

Humility befits us as no matter where we seek to go, who we seek to become, or how we pursue our human purposes, we always crave the security of the home God provides.

Samantha Harvey received the Booker Prize in 2024 for her slim novel, *Orbital*. It chronicles a day in the life of six astronauts from five different countries aboard the International Space Station.

Each day, orbiting around the earth, they witness the sunrise of a new day every ninety minutes. Time zones become blurred, even their sense of time become corrupted since we mark time by the earth's revolutions and orbits. Throughout the novel, the earth remains the main character, which grows more necessary in the lives of the astronauts.

In the opening pages, one astronaut learns that her mother has died and the others have no idea what to say. When staring at Mother Earth, how can you console someone who simply wants to go home? Let me quote: "They feel no need to speak, you only have to look out the window at a radiance doubling and redoubling. The earth from here is like heaven..."³

³ Samantha Harvey, *Orbital* (New York: Grove Press, 2023), p. 13.

I'll not spoil the ending, merely give you a glimpse of their discovery of the earth and its importance as home and their place within it as humans:

(The astronauts) were warned about what would happen with repeated exposures to this seamless earth. You will see...its fullness, its absence of borders except those between land and sea. You'll see no countries, just a rolling and indivisible globe which knows no possibility of separation, let alone war. And you'll feel yourself pulled in two directions at once. Exhilaration, anxiety, rapture, depression, tenderness, anger, hope, despair. Because of course you know that war abounds and that borders are something that people will kill and die for....up here...there's no wall or barrier – no tribes, no war or corruption or particular cause for fear (*Orbital*, 108).

As people of faith, we want to explain this great mystery of the creation of heaven and earth through our Bible Studies, our theological waxing and waning, which only exposes our limited understanding of divine truth.

No matter how hard we try; the encounter of God is both intensely personal and inexplicably communal. And, the

further we press into the mystery the closer we come to know our place within humanity and on this earthly planet. Humility befits us.

These moments of being disoriented, some would call “Copernicus Moments”. Copernicus Moments permit us to retain our worth and value but don’t require us to be the center of the universe. It is when we take ourselves out of the center that we make room for that which is greater than ourselves. This reorientation shifts the question, “How do I conquer this world?” to “How might my life serve God’s purposes in the world?”

Copernicus Moments remove us from the center which is good news because, even though we desperately try, we can’t save ourselves.⁴

We need to allow the experience of God to lead us not to certain answers, but to more expansive and imaginative questions. Marvel at God’s gifts to us. Join into an orchestra and chorus with all humanity to praise God.

⁴ My thanks to the Reverend Dr. Steve Koski for his sermon on April 20, 2022 in which I heard for the first time the phrase “Copernicus Moment.” No matter how sophisticated our scientific discovery becomes, we can never do anything but thank God for such beauty within the heavens and the gift of earth as our home and the promise of an eternal home.



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