

Welcome to summer worship at First Presbyterian Church. As we all embrace a different rhythm in the summer – with school ending, trips on the horizon, and hopefully a bit of a slower pace – in worship we are taking the chance to build upon three different sermon series that we hope will feed your mind and soul.

In July we are preaching a series called “Reconsidered” that will take a look at some aspects of our faith that might hit a little differently the more carefully we think about them.

In August we are preaching a series on the letters of Paul called “Living in Community” about how God calls even people who have different opinions and different convictions to live together as a family of faith. Yes – this is a nod to the election season that will quickly follow on the heels of summer this year.

In June we are reprising a short sermon series that I started last fall called “Things the Bible Doesn’t Talk About.” There is a lot that we know now that those who wrote the Bible didn’t know then...and I, for one, have found it fun to take some of those topics and bounce them off the Scripture that gives us God’s word. Even though the Bible doesn’t mention the things we will talk about in this series, there is still a lot the Bible can teach us about how to be faithful in the day and age that we live...even if that day and age are very different than the ones in which the Bible was written.

Today, believe it or not, the first of those things we are going to focus on that the Bible certainly doesn’t talk about is Extra Terrestrial Life.

I’m willing to bet that most of you haven’t heard many sermons on alien life. Turns out, this is a first for me, too.

But I’m interested in it because – the more science teaches us about our place in the universe, the more likely it is that we will discover that our little planet that exists in the “Goldilocks Zone” – far enough away from a star to not be too hot, and close enough to not be too cold...which creates an environment for life to flourish – is not, actually, unique.

In fact, astrophysicists estimate that there are...wait for it...**16 trillion** other planets that orbit stars in the “Goldilocks Zone” like ours.¹

In case you didn’t know: I am a theologian, and not an astrophysicist or a mathematician (I’m glad to clarify that, by the way) – but even I know that, statistically speaking, with 16 trillion options, the likelihood is that there is other intelligent life out there.

¹ This statistic comes from Dr. Andrew Davison, professor of astrobiology at Cambridge University. Dr. Davison gave this lecture at Davidson College in March of 2024.

And I happen to think that probability raises some really interesting questions: about the nature of humanity, about the character of God, and about what intelligent life elsewhere might mean for the life that we share on our planet. These are things I want to explore in our sermon this morning.

One of our core convictions as people of faith is that God created all things. So it is that the Scripture that grounds today’s sermon is a celebration of that creation. I will read the Scripture in a moment, but first the choir will sing an anthem of praise for the wonder of God’s handiwork.

Before we hear it, please join me in prayer: *Whenever we can quiet our minds and consider how small we are in the vastness of all you have created, O God, we are amazed once again by the simple truth that you love and care for us...and that you know us, intimately. So as we hear your word and reflect on the capacity you have for creating all that is, we ask that your Spirit will open our minds and hearts to receive a message of grace. We ask it in Jesus’ name. Amen.*

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A reading from Psalm 19. Listen with me for the word of God:

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.

In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,
which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.
Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
and its circuit to the end of them;
and nothing is hidden from its heat.

The law of the Lord is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the decrees of the Lord are sure,
making wise the simple;
the precepts of the Lord are right,
rejoicing the heart;

the commandment of the Lord is clear,
enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the Lord is pure,
enduring forever;
the ordinances of the Lord are true
and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.
Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

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One of the things that has always been a problem is when human beings make assumptions about our place in the order of things.

It turns out that we have this habit of thinking of ourselves as a little more important than we actually are.

There are quite a few examples of this tendency. Like, one time – a time in which the Hebrew Scripture (or the Old Testament) was written – when people believed the earth was flat and that their religion’s most holy site was, literally, the center of the universe. Ancient Jews believed the Mount Saini – where the Temple was built – was where the world began and around which all the suns and stars of the universe revolved. Muslims believed it was Mecca. Shintus believed it was the Ise Shrine. Chinese folklore believed the sacred Kinlun mountains were one of four maintain ranges that functioned as the pillars of the earth.

About 300 years or so before Jesus was born, Aristotle helped us come to understand that instead of the world being flat, it was – in fact – a sphere around which the sun and planets and other stars in the universe orbited.

1,800 years or so after that, in 1543, Nicolas Copernicus published a work that posited that the **earth** rotated around the **sun**. This knocked us down a peg, but we still believed that we were at least close to the center of the universe (which, people believed, orbited around our sun).

In 1610 Galileo discovered that Jupiter had moons, which meant that “there were other planets like earth” around which things orbited. People refused to believe this for many years.

In the late 1700s, Immanuel Kant (building on the work of Thomas Wright) speculated that our star and solar system was but a part of a larger galaxy which was dubbed the Milky Way – which was, until the 1920s, believed to be the only galaxy (and thus, the center of the universe).

Today, not only do we know that our galaxy, sun, and earth are not only **not** the *center* of the universe – but we know that the universe is *still expanding*; that the process of creation isn’t even finished.

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If all of our phones buzzed right now with a piece of **breaking news** that we had made contact with intelligent life from another planet, I have a hunch that – aside from the excitement, and the question of whether this other intelligent life was something to fear or to welcome – one of the main *feelings* many of us would have is uncertainty. Maybe uncertainty tinged with a bit of confusion.

Because if – or, when, we find proof of intelligent life beyond our planet it will mean that human beings are not as unique and powerful as we thought we were. We will be dethroned from the place of preeminence that we thought we occupied. Relativized, as we come to find that we are no longer **the intelligent** and sentient crown jewel of creation, but only **an intelligent** and sentient part of what God has made. And, if past is prelude, that will be hard for a good many of us to take.

Just ask anyone who was once in the majority and now finds themselves as one of the crowd. Ask someone who once had a position of honor and now has to adjust to being just like everyone else. Ask someone whose skill set was once thought to be irreplaceable, only to find that they now make a technology for it. We don’t often like to **admit** how much we dislike being de-centered from the place of privilege that we got used to occupying, but when it happens, I don’t know anyone who enjoys it.

So while it might be natural and normal for us to feel uncertain and confused by the idea of intelligent life on other planets – even before this idea is confirmed, whether in our lifetime or not, it gives us the chance...**now**...to ask ourselves whether being unique, and preminent, and powerful, and supremely intelligent are what is most important about being human?

Is our humanity defined by those things? Or are they just features that we’ve come to enjoy (and assumed we were entitled to) because we thought we were the only kind of beings like us in the universe?

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The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims God’s handiwork...

The Psalmist likely knew even less about astrophysics than your preacher, but they knew that the heavens above the world we knew evidenced the power and majesty of God.

As people of faith, we often talk about God being sovereign and omniscient and all-powerful...but, of course, even those words and ideas are conditioned by the limits of our brains to grasp what is beyond our capacity to know.

But consider what it is that we **do** know: about the ways our bodies work, about the ways birds know to migrate, about the way water shapes the canyon deep over time, about atoms and protons and neutrons and quarks, about how to measure the speed of things like light and sound.

And then – on a clear night when the sky is dark – look up. And consider that when we do, we see but the smallest fraction of a sliver of a galaxy that is one among billions in a universe that is still being formed by the hand of the God who – in the Psalmist’s language – knit us together in our mother’s wombs.

There may not be a way for us to comprehend the reach of God’s creative power – but there is a way for us to feel it...and to appreciate it. The word we use for that is glory.

Scripture tells us that we are – each of us – created in the imago dei...the image of God. I used to assume that meant that God had a somewhat human image – surely more perfect than my own, but still reminiscent of our human species. What was it I said earlier about human beings having a tendency to place ourselves in the center of things?

Maybe it is enough to recognize how lucky we are to bear a part of God’s image – and to anticipate what else we can learn about God if and when the time comes that we might see God’s image reflected in life we have yet to discover.

One of the questions each of my four children used to ask me when they were younger is a question I remember asking my parents when I was a child: “Which one of us do you love the most?”

It’s a developmentally appropriate question for a child to ask when they are trying to understand their place in a family which is their experience of the world.

I didn’t fully understand my parents answer to that question until I gave the same one to my own children: “It’s not about loving any one of you more than the other – you are each different, and I love you equally for the person who you are.”

No matter what we find out about the universe and what else is contained within it, I am reminded of the first letter to John, where we hear: “God is love. And those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.”

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When I picked this zany topic on which to preach on the first Sunday in the summer, I was thinking generally about life being slow and most of us finally having a change of pace from the breakneck speed we maintained during Maycember.

The closer I got to preaching today, the more aware I became that the first Sunday in the summer still happens at the speed of life: and that in the backdrop of us sitting in church this morning is the reality of multiple places in our world that are at war, and our nation continuing to widen the gap between political and ideological lines, and our city still trying to figure out how to provide for the common good amidst growth and development.

Suddenly, I worried that preaching a sermon about aliens might come off as a little bit out of touch – when perhaps what was more needed from the pulpit was something more practical...and less out there.

But what I have discovered, as I have read and thought about and reflected on this off-the-wall topic – which is the last thing I will say before I wrap up this sermon –

what I have discovered is that letting our minds drift beyond the life we know, and the arguments we witness and make, and the conflicts that feel inevitable and intractable and stuck – letting our minds think beyond that, to the places and things we don’t yet know – might offer us the helpful gift of perspective. And it might help us take ourselves a little less seriously. And it might remind us that God is at work amidst and beyond the things we think we control or are fated to inherit.

I find the fact that God is still at work creating the universe to be a refreshingly good piece of news. And I pray that news will give you hope for today and for all our tomorrows.

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In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.