

"One Earth, One Sky"

Text: Psalm 24: 1-2; Psalm 100; Romans 8: 18-25

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I have been enthralled . . . these recent weeks by some of the astonishing planetary discoveries that have come to light. Though I understand only the slight edges of the science behind them, I am none-the-less captive to flights of fancy and wondering!

Consider a headline in the Hartford Courant just three weeks ago: *Proxima B: The Earth of the Future?*² The article went on to explain. Apparently, Proxima B is a planet some "25 trillion miles away from our own but, curiously, is like a near-identical twin to earth. According to scientists' calculations, it's slightly bigger than spaceship earth and it sustains about the same average temperature." "It's in what they call the Goldilocks zone, not-too-hot, not-too-cold where liquid water - a key to life - is possible."²

Can you even imagine? Is there something like another earth out there? Scientists go on to say, and these are pretty notable astronomers from the likes of Harvard and Cal Tech: "Studying this planet could reveal something important about the timeline of life in the universe, and help us to determine whether we earthlings are early to the party." Wow! Very cool!

But then my enthusiasm fades some when I read the next sentence: "If there is life on Proxima B, it has a better future than earth, which is already more than halfway through its habitable existence."

Yikes! We are more than halfway through what scientists' project is the life of planet earth. That dampens my sense of wonder with the limits of mortality for earth and her ways and her people – which of course includes each of us by name.

Take a step deeper with me. Because though I have been enthralled by such thoughts, and have imagined flights of intergalactic dreaming, I know the truth. You do as well. We have only one earth and only one sky. And by any number of measures and indicators we ought well be worried.

A pastor of my acquaintance serves a congregation in Arizona and frequently posts daily devotions online.³ She is one among our United Church of Christ's "still-speaking-writers" group. In one of those recent postings she remembers when being in the third grade in her Sunday school meant that she would be given her own Revised Standard Version (RSV) of the bible. And that in that Bible, trustworthy and true, the first verse in Psalm 100 says "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the ____." (What's the word there?) In the RSV it is "lands" but in the more recent NRSV, and with better scholarship behind it, the word is "earth." As in, "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth." It's a much more expansive word. From one version to the other a footnote notes the change.

But here's the thing, if I might stretch it one more smidgeon. This marvelous planet of ours should not ever be a footnote! It's not an afterthought, or a corrected thought, or even a thought to be entertained. It should not have a superscript number or symbol

beside it, but stand alone as unfailingly essential. Again: we have only one earth and only one sky.

Deeper yet, another step. If we take the declaration from that Psalm at face value, it's a wonderful thing. It hints at the notion that this amazing planet of ours is part of an organic ecosystem that's alive!

Who is to be making a joyful noise? "It's *all* the earth. Not just all the lands, countries nations or even people!" It is so much larger. "It's the whole earth: rocks and rivers, deserts and forests, penguins and platypuses. And we who are merely people are a part of the chorus."⁴

It's a beautiful affirmation! Imagine all the earth singing in joy! Another Psalm reminds us that trees clap their hands and rivers sing and fields laugh! And – stay with me - if we are singing together, earth and earthlings and oceans and sky, the platform, the setting, the essence . . . is one of relationship.

Place that thought alongside of something Paul wrote to the early church in Rome. He was speaking of the renewal of all things and he placed an incredibly provocative phrase in the midst of his message. He intended it metaphorically, though this one is hard to unpack and has often been taken far from its context. It's layered and nuanced with some pretty complex theology that goes back to the Garden of Eden. He said, "the whole creation has been groaning in travail."

Now, if we can affirm our relationship with the earth as everyone – *every one* – making a joyful noise together: mountains and mice and trees and tulips, as Psalm 100 suggests; can we also place Paul's words like that, too? Can we imagine singing with the earth, rejoicing with the earth; but also groaning in her pain and crying in her anguish?

One last step. And this is where it really comes close. I want to assign each of us some homework. It's meant to create some new patterns or reinforce some old ones of seeing and loving the earth – perhaps in a way that tugs us deeper into relationship with the planet, our only home.

First: can we be sure to include the marvel and beauty, the fragility and the finitude of our earth, in our daily prayers? Just the thought of the mention of ground and sky, ocean and forest, and all of the critters of God's making: can we do that? Because doing so not only raises our best thoughts to God, it also raises our own consciousness – which has the effect of eventually changing our behavior.

Second: can we find within our daily round the commitment to do one small thing in kindness to the planet that we ride together? Just one small thing a day. A light not needed turned off. An old can of paint properly discarded. Can we become more aware at how small deeds can quickly multiply, for good or for ill, and choose the good as best we can.

Then third: Can we commit to reading more, learning more, studying more, paying attention more to the crisis our planet is in? The science behind global warming, controversial as it is to some, simply cannot be denied. It's not a political issue or

economic concern as much as it is a moral one. And a clear mandate of Christian stewardship is that we take seriously our part in becoming actively committed to leaving the planet someday better than we found it.

So let's start the homework now. And let's do that by sharing together the prayer⁵ that I placed at the heading of your bulletin today:

*The earth is yours, Lord,
in all its wonder and variety.
Help us to care for it and live on it responsibly;
to hold your gift with careful hands,
valuing land and creatures,
ocean and sky
and all of its inhabitants.
Amen.*

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- ¹ Faye Flam. "Proxima B: The Earth of the Future?" Hartford Courant, August 28, 2016, p. C-4.
- ² Seth Borenstein. "New Neighbor: Earth-Like Planet Found Right Next Door." Hartford Courant, August 25, 2016, p. A-1 and A-4.
- ³ The Rev. Talitha Arnold. "The Earth: More Than a Footnote." UCC Daily Devotionals, April 18, 2016.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Margaret Harvey, "The World Is Yours" in Acorns and Archangels, Wildgoose Books, 2009, p. 158.