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# Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Stargazing”

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## Psalm 8

*O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.*

*Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.*

*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established;*

*what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?*

*Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.*

*You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet,*

*all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,*

*the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.*

*O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

## "Stargazing"

### Psalm 8

For the first eight years of her life, Tina had an idyllic childhood. She grew up in Albany, Georgia in a large and relatively wealthy family. Her father owned a drugstore and had been able to provide his family with a beautiful old house. The house was her mother's pride and joy and the gathering place for all the kids in the neighborhood. Tina loved every nook and cranny of that house.

But Tina's father was a successful businessman and that meant that he took risks. Many times, those risks paid off, but from time to time they didn't. Then, for a season, the family would have to do without some of the luxuries to which they'd grown accustomed: shopping at the high end store in town, flying in Maine lobsters for a birthday party. Those luxuries weren't so hard to give up, but the year Tina turned eight, the unthinkable happened: one of her father's business endeavors went really wrong, and they lost their house.

Tina and her parents and her brothers and sisters moved across town to a tiny, run-down house that seemed like a mockery of the house they had so loved. That night, for the first time ever, Tina had to share a room with her sisters. While she lay in bed, listening to both of her sisters cry themselves to sleep, she realized there was a hole in the ceiling just above her. Through that hole, she could see the stars. If Tina had been a little older she might have been dismayed; after all, a hole in the ceiling big enough to see stars through would also be big enough to let in rain and bugs. But her view of the stars gave Tina a sense of comfort. It reminded her that the world was bigger than just the house she lived in, bigger than the grief she felt over the changes in her life. The night sky reminded her that although her world had changed forever, the universe had stayed just the same.<sup>1</sup>

The night sky certainly has a way of putting us in our place. Did you know that if we scaled down our solar system so that the sun was the size of a tennis ball, the Earth would be a grain of sand . . . 27 feet away? Imagine how small we would be in this model. The next nearest star to the sun in this model would be located more than 1400 *miles* away! And say you wanted to

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<sup>1</sup> Tina McElroy Ansa tells this story in The Moth podcast. You can listen to it here: <http://themoth.org/posts/stories/stars-on-the-ceiling>.

travel across the Milky Way galaxy: we now know it would take you 100,000 light years -- and the Milky Way is just one of billions of galaxies, each of which contain billions of stars.<sup>2</sup>

The universe is nothing short of mind-boggling.

When Psalm 8 was written, humans hadn't yet figured out how our Solar System is ordered or put numbers to the magnitude of the universe. No human beings had landed on the moon and no rovers had landed on Mars. But all the information we now have about the moon and the sun and the stars doesn't make this psalm's question any less relevant today:

"What are human beings that [God] is mindful of them; mortals that [God] cares for them?" The plural was actually a retranslation of the original in an attempt to make it gender neutral. The original language reflects not a communal existential crisis, but an individual, personal one: "what is *one human being* that you should remember him? What is *a single mortal*, that you should care for her?"

Stargazing has a way of putting us in our place, of reminding us just how insignificant we really are.

Rita Pierson has been a professional educator since 1972. She's taught many, many children. And in over 40 years in the classroom, she's learned that education is all about connection. Once a colleague said to her, "They don't pay me to like kids, they pay me to teach kids. I teach; they should learn. Case closed." Well, yes, said Rita, except for this one thing: "Kids don't learn from people they don't like." In other words, you can't learn when you don't feel connected. Students need more than a teacher, they need a champion, someone who believes in them, invests in them, nurtures in them the belief that they can be more than they are, that they can do things they can't even imagine.

Pierson gives some examples of how good teachers do this. First, they equip. As one of her students said: "Give me a No. 2 pencil, I can't do much. But if you give me a box of colored pencils, I'm an artist."

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<sup>2</sup> Kathryn Schifferdecker in her commentary on the passage from May 30, 2010 on the website Working Preacher. Read the full text here: [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=587#post\\_comments](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=587#post_comments).

Second, you put your heart and soul into it and admit when you're wrong. Once, subbing in a math class, Pierson taught a whole lesson on decimals, which she knew she didn't totally understand. Later, she discovered she'd taught the lesson completely wrong. The next day, she stood up before the students and told them she'd messed up. "I taught it all wrong, I'm so sorry," she told them. They nodded. "Yeah, we know you did, but that's okay, Ms. Pierson. You were so excited, we just let you go."

Third, you build students up rather than tear them down. She once had a student who missed eighteen questions on a twenty-question test. But instead of putting a big, red -18 at the top, she put +2. When the student got his test back he thanked her. "-18 sucks the life out of you," he said. "+2 says, 'I ain't all bad.'"<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes, stargazing can suck all the life out of us, bring us to one of those existential moments where we feel totally insignificant. But our insignificance in this vast universe is only part of the story. The -18 equivalent of stargazing is the psalmist's first response: "What is one human being that [God] should remember him? What is a single mortal, that [God] should care for her?" But the psalmist goes on to discover the +2 perspective: "Yet you have made human beings a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor."

What does it mean that human beings are "a little lower than God, and crowned...with glory and honor"? What the psalmist is getting at here is the uniqueness of humanity. We humans are the only ones on the planet -- in the entire universe -- created in God's image. God has made us -- with all our faults and foibles and failures -- in God's own image and entrusted us with the world God created.

The psalmist realizes that, as a human being created in God's image, he is called to do more than just enjoy God's creation; he is called — we are called — to serve God by loving creation and its creatures, including — and perhaps especially — our fellow human beings. What we do, how we live on this earth, matters to God.

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<sup>3</sup> Thanks to David Lose for sharing Rita Pierson's TED talk and his thoughts on it here: <http://www.davidlose.net/2013/05/every-child-needs-a-champion/>.

How we live matters to God. There is nothing easy about this responsibility God has given us to love creation and one another. The events of this week's news cycle have highlighted that. We're headed back to Iraq because a group that is so bad Al Qaeda won't associate with it is starting to gain the upper hand, forcing men, women, and children to take refuge in Syria, of all places. Here at home the town of Ferguson, Missouri is looking a lot like Selma, Alabama fifty years ago as police in riot gear clash with protestors heartsick and furious over the death of Michael Brown. And what are we to say when someone who could light up stage and screen with his talent and vulnerability and make us laugh harder than ever before finds life unbearable and cuts his own life short?

At times like these, it is almost impossible not to feel insignificant. It is almost impossible not to think that there is nothing you or I or any one person can do to make a dent in all the sadness and violence and fear in our world. This might just be the time when we need creation the most, because creation speaks to us in ways no human-made thing can. This is why so many people say they'd rather worship God on a beach or a hiking trail than in church. Creation has a way of reminding us of our place in the world — both that we are ridiculously insignificant but also that God has called us to be partners in caring for creation and each other and God has given us the capacity to perform extraordinary acts of love and kindness.

Theologian Richard Rohr writes that "Lovers do not know full happiness until they delight in the same thing, like new parents with the ecstasy of their first child." When two people have a child together, their relationship changes forever. They have a common purpose, a mutual vocation, and a shared delight that they did not have before.

When we look at creation and see God's fingerprints all over it, our relationship with God changes. In addition to our insignificance we discover our deepest purpose and vocation: we are partners with God. God has trusted us -- us -- to care for this world and its creatures, including our fellow human beings.

When her husband Drew, a Maine state trooper, died suddenly one day in the line of duty, Kate Braestrup received the news in the living room of the

home in which she and Drew were raising four young children. Forty minutes after hearing that she was now a widow, Kate sat in shock with her close friend Monica. The doorbell rang and Monica sprang up to answer it. A young man stood on the front steps, clad in a spiffy dark suit, his hair combed, exuding, as Kate put it, “a scent of soap and virtue.” He held out a pamphlet and asked Monica, “Have you heard the Good News?” For a long second, Monica glared at him, not sure whether to punch him or laugh hysterically. Instead, she slammed the door.

A few minutes later, the doorbell rang again. This time, Kate opened the door. Standing in front of her was her neighbor, an elderly woman with whom she had exchanged no more than a dozen words in ten years. She had pot holders on her hands, which held a pan of warm brownies, and tears rolled down her cheeks. “I just heard,” she said. Kate writes, “that pan of brownies was, it later turned out, the leading edge of a tsunami of food that came to my children and me, a wave that did not recede for many months after Drew’s death. I didn’t know that my family and I would be fed three meals a day for weeks and weeks. I did not anticipate that neighborhood men would come to drywall the playroom, build bookshelves, mow the lawn, get the oil changed in my car. I did not know that my house would be cleaned and the laundry done, that I would have embraces and listening ears, that I would not be abandoned to do the labor of mourning alone. All I knew was that my neighbor was standing on the front stoop with her brownies and her tears: she was the Good News.”<sup>4</sup>

God created this world. God filled it with every good and terrible thing. God walked this world as Jesus and blows through it every day as the Holy Spirit. Everything in this world is sacred. Everything in this world has the capacity to reveal God . . . and that includes you and me. What an honor -- and what a responsibility -- that what we do, how we live, how we treat one another, matters dearly to God, because we reveal God — to the world and to each other. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Braestrup, Kate (2007). *Here If You Need Me: A True Story*. Little, Brown and Company. Kindle Edition, pp. 53-54.



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