

“Over All”

Sermon by Dan Harrison, Pastor, Church of the Covenant, Lynchburg, VA 2/7/21

Psalm 8

Last week I shared about the Hebrew word “*olam*” which is featured in the common beginning of Jewish prayers: *Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech ha-olam*. Translated: *Blessed are you Lord, our God, Ruler of the (the hidden/ the mystery/infinite/eternal/world/galaxy/universe)* – which is due to the nature of the Hebrew word “*olam*” whose meaning has various dimensions. Often “*Melech ha-olam*” is simply translated as “Ruler of the Universe.” Last week I explored its meaning as the Ruler of the “hidden.” This week I want to springboard into a more widespread understanding in this: “Creator over all.” This concept is easily shown in the Psalmist’s own words in Psalm 8, framing God as Creator over all. There is much majesty in this conceptual framing of our Creator, a regal notion of who God is in relationship to the earth.

As a young 12 year old I camped out in our backyard in Oklahoma one night, just me and my dog “Shaker.” I didn’t have a tent or anything, so I laid out under the stars. I had just learned in school some seemingly irrelevant information about our solar system and the rest of the universe. I had tucked it away into the deep recesses of my mind. But on that clear night as I began to look at the moon and then the stars, one after another, trying to count them, my mind retrieved the information and the conceptual data overwhelmed my senses (I’ve updated it just a bit since we’ve discovered more since then:)

- The moon is 239,000 miles away from earth
- About 1 million earths can fit into the sun
- 100,000 MILLION stars (like our sun) are estimated to exist in our Galaxy
- Galaxies can range in size from a dwarf with as few as ten million stars to massive giant galaxies with a hundred trillion stars.
- It is estimated that there are more than 170 billion galaxies in the observable universe

My head swooned as I stared up to the stars and contemplated all that I was seeing and all that I could not see, and that God (or the heavens) was beyond it all boggled my mind. It made me shutter. I had a spiritual awakening at that moment that has anchored me to this day. I felt crushed under the weight of insignificance. I felt like the psalmist crying out thousands of years ago, “Who am I that you think of me?” I cried out to God, after convulsing in tears, for my Creator to give me peace and understanding. After a moment of time had passed laying under the stars, I felt a peace like no other. I could almost hear my Creator speak through creation itself, and that included the stars above me. I was not insignificant. Somehow in the grander scheme of things, I did matter and God did think of me, and loves me. It was a moment of epiphany and has given me guidance to this day when the darkness tries to rob me of my joy. God is there, ever present: *Melech ha-olam*. The Lord over all.

Astronauts have had similar experiences to my own but in a sort of reverse perspective called the “overview effect” which happens when in space they turn to view the earth as a whole. In that moment

they feel above the earth but still part of it, and from there they observe the planet as a united-living, organism. However, at the same time they can see how the earth has been impacted by humans. They can literally see where man-made boundaries have been used to separate each other over millennia and the impact, the scarring it has on our earth surface. But more than just the isolation they see historically and currently among the species, they can see a holistic view of humanity with creation, function as one giant organism together. This perspective falls into the category of being in “awe” of our relative unity due to the single planet we occupy, but it also puts us just one giant organism relative to the rest of the planets of the galaxy. This overview effect almost strips away our need for foolish tribalism and racial prejudice. That’s why many astronauts look beyond politics and other nationalism and racism, especially after returning from space, because it is all meaningless for them, in the grander scheme of our place in the universe. We are one. And for those of us who believe in the Creator, Melech ha-olam, Creator over all – even the parts of the universe we can’t see yet.

This should allow us to easily meld into the fluidity of what we call humanity, and flow with a certain level of love for it. Let us syncopate with one another as we syncopate with our Creator, and in that syncopation we will find the rhythm of wholeness, of healing, of love, of peace, and of hope—together.

Shalom