

“A Drop from a Bucket”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Psalm 8; Isaiah 40:12-26
July 14, 2019 - Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Galileo did not invent the telescope, but he was the first to put it to good use. It turned out that the moon wasn't just a cool night visitor up above, but it was its own place, with peaks and valleys and shadows.

Almost immediately people started writing stories about traveling there. In the 1620s, an Anglican Bishop named Francis Godwin wrote a book called *The Man in the Moone*, in which a Spaniard named Domingo Gonsales gets marooned on an island and develops a flying machine to harness the power of the island's wild geese in order to head home. But he's attacked on the way and, in escaping, the swans take him on a twelve-day journey to the moon, where he finds a utopian Christian civilization. Godwin's book was published posthumously and anonymously, as it was a bit controversial for the time, what with its heliocentric universe and its gravity and all this written by a member of the clergy!

Others followed with more stories that weren't magical, but imaginatively mechanical. Through ingenuity and invention, humanity could imagine itself slipping those surly bonds of earth.

And then along came Isaac Newton and new physics and the invention of the vacuum pump by Robert Boyle and Robert Hooke and suddenly people who were interested understood that between the planets, and between earth and the moon, was a vacuum. They had no way to overcome that obstacle, and so by the late 17th Century any stories about going to the moon were back to relying on magic.

That lasted for about a century, until the Industrial Revolution gave us pressure vessels, and minds began to wonder about how to create capsules that could withstand a vacuum. Let's go back to the moon!

In its June 1835 issue, the *Southern Literary Messenger* magazine published a short story called "The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall." It told of an unemployed bellows-maker, deeply in debt, who decided to create an encapsulated balloon carriage that is launched into the sky by dynamite and floats through the vacuum of space all the way to the moon. Any guesses as to who would write such a space adventure? It was none other than... Edgar Allan Poe.

Thirty years later Jules Verne wrote *From the Earth to the Moon*, which imagined a giant cannon being used to project its moon-bound characters into space. That's not *exactly* how the Apollo 11 astronauts got there, but Verne did have a crew of three launching from Florida, which is pretty nifty for 1865!

Alexander MacDonald draws a straight line from these stories of seeing a way up and out and to the lunar surface to the first rockets and then the Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo programs.¹ And MacDonald should know: he is the Program Executive for Emerging Space within the Office of the

¹ TED Talk, Alexander MacDonald, "How centuries of sci-fi sparked spaceflight" at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jNlpGLpelg&list=WL&index=6&t=0s>

Chief Technologist at NASA Headquarters. And he wonders what stories we might tell now that will inspire future generations to do the seemingly impossible.

We lift up our eyes on high and we tell wild stories of space adventure in order to inspire one another to dream of a world that's just a little bit bigger.

There's a short story that belongs in the Discworld series of the prolific wordsmith of fantasy, Terry Pratchett, in which a philosopher is arguing with Death and Death seeks to compliment humanity by referring to us as "a lucky species of ape that is trying to understand the complexities of creation via a language that evolved in order to tell one another where the ripe fruit was."²

We lift up our eyes on high and we create planets and galaxies and alien life forms and NASA keeps coming along with new images to remind us, as Arthur C. Clarke did in his 1968 novel *2001: A Space Odyssey*, that each story we tell "is only a work of fiction. The truth, as always, will be far stranger."

Words have always been marvelous but inadequate to contain the entirety of what we're feeling and excited about and worried about, which is why we keep writing and telling stories, and sometimes we have to leave this planet or this solar system when the colors and the physics and the life forms have felt too limiting.

The first episode of *Star Trek*, aired in September of 1966. Joining on the voyages of the USS Enterprise, Americans found a world that had moved beyond the struggles of the day. As the British Empire was crumbling, the starfleet had to follow the Prime Directive, forbidding them to interfere with the normal development of any society they came across. By the second season, the Enterprise was being navigated on its journey of exploration — not exploitation — by, of all things, a Russian at the helm. It was an idealistic world beyond the Cold War and one that had long-ago gotten over so many other divisive issues.

American author Ursula Le Guin wrote that "science fiction is not prescriptive; it is descriptive."³ American culture wrestled with the extremes of dystopia and utopia through the middle of the 20th Century as it reeled from two World Wars to peace and civil rights movements to the nuclear age to immense prosperity. And we saw all of that played out in space. When we were concerned about the persistence of the American Way, we could find an odd comfort in a family surviving with the warning, "Danger, Will Robinson!" on *Lost in Space* (which took place in the far-off future of 1997). In 1968's *Planet of the Apes* we saw space exploring humans looking on in disgust as racism, classism, and the dangers of fundamentalism played out among the apes.

Whether it has been bodies being snatched, or cute extra-terrestrials trying to teach us lessons, or invasions by far more advanced societies than ours, our space stories pushed us to reexamine our limited understanding, to confront our fears, to see that we are both "dust on the scales" of the universe and simultaneously able to accomplish miraculous feats of courage and ingenuity when we recognized the sacredness of our shared humanity.

Or, as the psalmist puts it, "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

² "Death and What Comes Next: A Discworld short story" by Terry Pratchett

³ *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin

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...”

So much of recent space fiction has leaned hard toward the dystopian. If you put *Star Trek: The Next Generation* next to the 2000s reboot of *Battlestar Galactica*, Captain Picard seems closer to Mayberry than on any sort of danger. Things have gotten very sinister and cynical as we have failed to find a way out of cycles of violence and corruption and our shared sacred humanity hasn't come close to the value of the almighty dollar in the eyes of our leaders.

Back in May I got to go to what is essentially preacher summer camp at the Festival of Homiletics in Minneapolis. I went to a lecture by celebrity-in-the-church-world Brian McLaren. He was talking about how money blinds us, and I found it helpful, so I stayed around for his next lecture, which I hadn't bothered to check the title of. By May, our Worship Committee had already agreed to this moon-landing space series, so you can imagine my joy when Brian McLaren started his lecture with a slide that read “Preaching as Science Fiction.”

He talked about all these movies and books and old shows, but he really focused on one movie that I wouldn't have thought of if you gave me all afternoon. It was the 1998 film *The Truman Show*. That movie is old enough to pick up a few things at the package store, so I'm not going to apologize for these spoilers:

The Truman Show stars Jim Carrey as Truman Burbank, a man who is unaware that his entire life has taken place on a huge dome of a Hollywood set and that every moment of it has been broadcast around the world. Everyone he knows is an actor and everything that happens is controlled by the producers. Eventually, Truman discovers the truth and sails to the edge of his world and finds a door and leaves.

Last Sunday we read the first of the creation stories in Genesis in which God creates a dome in the sky to separate the waters. We heard from a Biblical scholar who described the creation of the dome as God blowing a bubble.

In his lecture, Brian McLaren pointed out that all the great space stories seek to get us to break out of our domes — domes of fear of the other, of pride, of small-mindedness and playing small. When it feels like the world has got us pinned down, the prophet Isaiah brings comfort in reminding us that the machinations of emperors and despots and hot-tempered rulers are like the movements of grasshoppers to the God of the universe. And the Psalmist is there to join in the call for us to lift our eyes up and see true majesty in mountain and sea and sky and stars.

It's tempting to close here with some hokey exhortation to “shoot for the stars.” But, in all sincerity, do just that, but not in the name of poster platitudes. Instead, take on a spirit of exploration because beyond what we know is where we find what we wonder about. Beyond the limits of our domes we discover that we don't know everything, and that we need to rely on one another in prayer, in shared recognition of humanity, in responsibility for the one and only home base that we have, and in pushing the boundaries of the miracles of science as we tell more wild and inspiring stories.

Now to the ruler of all worlds be honor and glory forever and ever!
Amen.