

*Order of Service -- August 13, 2017
God Saw That It Was Good*

Musical Prelude

Greeting -- Carl Sagan, Pale Blue Dot

1st Hymn: How Great Thou Art, Green 8

*Readings -- Genesis 1:31; "Late Fragment," by Raymond Carver; Acts 17:26-28;
Romans 8:28*

2nd Hymn: All Through the Night, Green 213

Joys and Concerns

Musical interlude

Prayer -- God Bless Our Beautiful Home

3rd Hymn: Simple Gifts, with handout second verse, Green 271

Message: "God Saw That It Was Good"

Silent worship

4th Hymn: God Who Stretched the Spangled Heavens, Green 309

Closing -- Beloved Upon the Earth

Introductions/Announcements/Afterthoughts

Postlude

Greeting

Good Morning Friends. It's August again, the time of cricket song and tomatoes, goldenrod and still-long, but ever-shortening days. It's also the last time I will be bringing a message from this spot here for a while. And my Friday evening I had nearly 50 pages of words all trying to say Thank You. To this meeting, for the gift you have given me, in listening to me all these many months and seasons, for witnessing and worshiping and being you and being here, for being patient and tolerant and letting me grow up in front of you. I have whittled this down from 50 pages, but nevertheless I hope you will forgive me for repeating myself a little and revisiting old themes. And I will begin our worship together with a quotation from Carl Sagan with which I began back in February of 2015. Mr. Sagan wrote a book in 1994 titled *Pale Blue Dot*, the words he used to describe a photo of Earth in space taken by Voyager 1, on February 14, 1990 from a record distance of about 3.7 billion miles away. He said:

Look again at that pale blue dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every "superstar", every "supreme leader", every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there — on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

And in our neighborhood on this mote of dust we gather together again on this Sunday in August, to be Friends, and to sing our first hymn of praise to That of God in Everything we can behold, everything we can consider from our place on this pale blue dot. ***How Great Thou Art, Green 8.***

Readings

Genesis 1:31

And God Saw all that He had made, and indeed it was very good.

Late Fragment, by Raymond Carver

*And did you get what
you wanted from this life, even so?*

I did.

*And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel myself
beloved on the earth.*

Acts 17:26-28

From one blood he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live,²⁷ so that they would search for God and perhaps reach for him and perhaps find him—though indeed he is never far from each one of us.²⁸ For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his children.”

Romans 8:28 *For we know that all things work together to the good for those who love...*

Second Hymn: All Through the Night, Green 213

Prayer

Six or seven years ago, I once shared the bedtime prayer we say in our family as the prayer here in worship, and I would like to do that again today.

God Bless our family. God bless our cats, chickens, and bees. God bless our brothers, sisters, grandparents, aunts, uncles cousins, friends, neighbors, and loved ones near and far. God bless people we know and people we don't know. God bless our ancestors and our great great great grandchildren. God bless anyone who is hurt, scared, sad, sick, or doesn't have something that they need. God bless all the families, the animal, the plant, and the people. God bless all the animals, plants and people who made it possible for us to eat today. God bless the sun, the soil, and the seasons. God bless trees that give us clean air to breath and keep us warm in the winter. God bless wetlands that give us clean water. God bless the water. God bless the oceans and the rain. God bless the stars and the moon and the dark night sky. God bless the wind and the quiet. God bless our beautiful home.

Benediction

God bless our beautiful home.

God bless the endless night sky.

God bless the mystery beyond the mystery. God bless The One Who Blesses, the One in Whom we live and move and have our being.

May we dare to love, while we are alive.

May we find ourselves in the place just right, upon this pale blue dot, a dust-mote suspended in a sunbeam.

May we call ourselves beloved....May we feel ourselves beloved upon the Earth.

Message

Not too long ago, in the early spring, sitting in our mudroom getting ready to go to school, my six year old son Cazimer and I were considering the moon outside our window, still visible in the morning sky, and he asked “Mommy, is the sky *attached* to the Earth?” “Well...” I said, slowly, thinking as I did, *does he mean ‘attached’ like: is the sky partial to the Earth? Or ‘attached’ like: is the sky fastened to the Earth?* But out loud I reasoned “the sky is touching the Earth, even if we can’t see it, because the air is all around us and goes right down to the ground...” I paused, to see if this train of thought was what he was after, and he said, with satisfaction, as if he was teaching me, as if he had solved a riddle that had stumped everyone else and discovered the secret that eluded even the grown ups: “The sky is actually the whole Universe and we’re in it. Right here is where the Universe starts!” So said my six year old, the budding cosmologist: Right Here is where the Universe starts.

Here on earth, in our kitchens and gardens, streets, slums, deserts, subways, and houses of worship, we have a foothold, a toehold in the Universe, for a time. Being human, as far as we know, there is no other place for us to experience the Universe, to contemplate its vastness and our smallness, except for here on Earth...Actually, as far as we know there is no other place apart from this pale blue dot To Be anything at all, To Do anything at all, to Feel Anything at all, to Love Anything at all, no other place to experience Existence Itself. As far as we know.

It seems to be part of our condition to ask after, to reach for, to feel wonder and awe and fear and excitement about the Great Beyond -- The Beyond Out There in space and The Beyond Out There in time -- eternity, infinity, the mystery that is outside our full comprehension, just out of reach of our grasp. I do not know for sure whether there is life out there. Nor do I know the form that life takes after death. But I do know that there is life here. I do know that there is life now.

And in the collected and faithfully handed down words our spiritual ancestors left to us, giving voice to their awesome wonder at the impossible mystery of finding themselves alive and here on what they couldn’t have known then was a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam, in the first chapter of the first book of those collected writings, God proclaims that all the life there is to behold is very good. Over and Over again, seven times, God sees the Creation in all its aspects and stages and calls it good. Tov, in the Hebrew. In that language, the word carries the meaning

of goodness but also an essential quality of continuance, of goodness that is capable of *furthering its own goodness*, life imbued with life-generating and creative capacity, all things working together to the Ultimate Good. That's *Tov*. More than 2000 years later, having seen that picture of the Earth in space from billions of miles away and knowing the truth of our dust-moted-ness, our sciences and our stories and *our* best attempts at meaning-making tell us that Earth is the only body in our solar system and the only body of which we are aware in the Universe that generates the capacity to produce and further life itself. Oh, we look for evidence of life elsewhere, and maybe someday we will find it, but even having found life somewhere else will not change the fact that **this** is the only place where we are actually living, for a very, very short time. As our modern sabers rattle and our species acts as if this toehold in the Universe is nothing really very special, I wish so much that we could all suddenly and miraculously remember to be of that one mythic blood, all children of the Creator, the One whose breath moved over the face of the waters like a mother smoothing back a child's hair in sleep, the One who calls us beloved upon the Earth, who calls his whole Creation good.

Except I also know that sometimes it does not seem so good. Sometimes it seems like this pale blue dot is a tiny cairn of mourning, with outsized sorrow for one so small. For many of our kind on this planet, there is suffering beyond the telling. Even here in the land of plenty we're fragile, with easily broken bodies and hearts. We lose. Our way, our loved ones, our lives. Sometimes there is no one to blame but God. Sometimes -- often, it seems -- the peril and precarity of life on a dust mote in endless space is exacerbated by the greed, or fear, or ignorance, or just bland carelessness of human beings. Many, many complex theologies have come out of the Christian tradition to try to explain both the *Tov* and its disruption, the goodness and its rupture, both the far-awayness and the nearness of what we call God, this Universe of Being that seems simultaneously wholly other, cold, and distant but also somehow right exactly where we are, a wealth of blessings heaped lavishly upon us so that in some moments we are sure we truly are God's children. For millennia humans have tried to reconcile the improbable gift of life with the grim and ever faithful companion of death, love with loss, longing with belonging, infinity and eternity with the concrete and terribly finite, the thirst for justice with the persistence of injustice, a yearning for peace with the perpetual human capacity for brutality and violence, the grandeur and size of everything with the smallness of our fretful, vulnerable selves. We spin in the vastness of space, oblivion always a breath away, and I wonder if that great night we move through and those unaccountable paradoxes are somehow part of the design, part of the lesson. I wonder if we could learn to love in any other way, in any other world, in any other Creation? Could we realize the gift we're given without its impermanence, its

fragility? Could we be grateful for life, savor and cherish it, without death? Could we love at all? How would we reach for God if we didn't feel a distance, even as we know in some deep and ancient way, that we can't be apart **from** something we are **a part of, however small a part we are**...The Creation that God called *Tov* seems designed to encourage yearning, reaching, longing, wondering, and also, if we dare -- seeing that it is Good. if we dare, cherishing it. cherishing what is precious. Cherishing what is small. Cherishing what will not last. The Creation that God called *Tov* dares us to love and be loved, even so. Even so, as Raymond Carver says in his late fragment of poem, written just before he died. Even so, and Especially so. For what *would* love be if we lived forever, if ease and plenty were guaranteed, if there was a crowded neighborhood of Earths all around us out in space? The Creation that God called *Tov* furthers its good, self-perpetuates, regenerates, goes on, continues, even through death, decay, loss, terrifying odds, mistakes and setbacks. We are, it seems, a scrappy little mote of dust.

Recently my nine year old, Cyrus, came back from summer camp talking excitedly about Mars: we were going to go there, he said, there was going to be colony, and people would live on Mars, which would be good because Earth was getting crowded, and dirty. But, I countered, there's no summer camp on Mars. And thus started a conversation that has continued all summer. Every time we have eaten blueberries, someone says, there are no blueberries on Mars. Thanks Earth. Take a swim, play in the stream in Brooktondale -- no water on Mars. time to take out the compost? no compost on Mars. No vile rotting stench, ok, but no fertile flower beds, either, a goodness furthered by funk. No waterfalls, no air, no soil, no smell of coming rain. No green leaves, no peaches. There's no death there, at least not until we arrive, but there's no life, either.

Meanwhile this summer, our small speck of a planet has been spinning through the path of Comet Swift-Tuttle, the largest object known to repeatedly pass by Earth, and yesterday we passed through the densest, dustiest area of debris it leaves behind every year, which creates the annual Perseid meteor shower. It's been cloudy, so the view of the nighttime sky has been obscured, and our family missed the peak of the shower yesterday, but tonight is supposed to be clear in the hours before dawn, so we will sleep outside, and hope to see some shooting stars. Comet Swift-Tuttle last passed nearby to Earth during its orbit around the sun in 1992, and the next time will be in year 2126, 109 years from now.

One hundred and nine years from now, even our youngest members will have passed from the living to the dead. In just over a century, perhaps humanity will have made the leap to peaceful coexistence, learned to live together lightly and lovingly upon the earth, to balance private wealth and common good, to marry the pursuit of happiness with the experience of true contentment, liberty with responsibility, love with the certainty of loss, the incredible gift of life with the steadfast companion of death. Perhaps in August of the year 2126 our children's children's children will lie on their backs in a summer field, the sound of crickets all around, the trees and goldenrod murmuring and whispering in the dark, and turn their faces to the night sky and ponder, as my family will tonight, the infinity of space and time, and how small we are, how really infinitesimal is everything we love. Perhaps they will also marvel that things so small -- children, spouses, parents, homes, mountains, rivers, trees -- can be so tiny in the vast cathedral of space and so huge in the private churches of our hearts. Perhaps their thoughts will turn to us, their ancestors, the ones who tried our best, who tried to learn to love while we were alive, the only time we have to love, as far as we know, who tried to grasp the ungraspable, who held out hope for peace, who dreamed of a future, a beyond, a world in which they, our descendents, would get a chance to see the shooting stars in an August sky and feel that sense of awe at the simultaneous, improbable large-ness and small-ness of being alive.

And God saw all that He had made, and indeed, it was very good.