

## **A Sense of Due Proportion**

Michael Jenkins

Isaiah 40:21-31

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*Think of the sermon today as an exercise in regaining perspective. When squawking voices hype the moment, escalate the tempers, blow out of all proportion the threats and promises of humanity, I propose an antidote, the restoration of a due sense of proportion.*

Geoff Snodgrass and I regularly exchange articles on the subject of astrophysics, a subject that fascinates both of us. Last week Geoff sent me story from the magazine “Scientific American” titled “Giant Galaxies from the Universe’s Childhood Challenge Cosmic Origin Stories.”

After reading the article, I responded to him saying, “This is mind-boggling! We know nothing — or next to nothing!”

To which Geoff responded, “And yet we pretend.”

“And yet we pretend:” this pretension is the subject of so many of the Psalms of adoration and passages such as we find here in Isaiah 40.

We pretend we’ve got a pretty good bead on things because only by pretending can we entertain the truly silly idea that we understand God, the World, and Other Things. From the very earliest days of human community, beyond the written records we made thousands of years ago, we’ve been struggling to comprehend, trying to get a handle on the reality we inhabit. But it wasn’t really until modern times that we fell under the illusion that we really do understand what’s going on.

So, if you will, please allow today’s sermon to be a plea for conscious wonder, the sort of wonder and awe and reverence that deflates hubris and gives us the gift of a due sense of proportion as creatures.

Let me take you to a valley thousands of miles from here that has helped me gain both a due sense of proportion in nature and history, and, at the same time has made me feel like I belong to people who are called to the vocation of wonder.

If you’ve ever driven the A816 road from Oban Scotland southward along the coast of Argyll, you have probably driven right through the Kilmartin Glen. I know that the first time Debbie and I and our children went down that road only two things occupied our minds, first, getting to the Mull of Kintyre (because we all wanted to visit the area made famous by Paul McCartney) and, second, dealing with our children’s carsick because I was driving the snaking rolling road at breakneck speed. We didn’t even notice Kilmartin that first time in 1987 although we drove right through it.

Later, however, when I discovered that this little valley in the length of a couple of miles holds a greater concentration than anywhere in Europe of Neolithic monuments, standing

stones, burial cairns, henges and so forth dating back thousands upon thousands of years, Debbie and I made it a regular stop in our travels. However, I don't think the full significance of this valley and the little village at its head had dawned on me until just a few years ago.

On that particular trip, I was standing on the geological outcropping where the village sits about halfway down the mountains, the valley floor still hundreds of feet below. I was standing, in fact, in the churchyard of the modern church at Kilmartin which was built as a Presbyterian Kirk in 1834. But this brand-new church stands on the site of a succession of churches, including a medieval Roman Catholic Church, which was built there because it was already the site of a standing carved cross marking the place where people could gather to hear a Celtic priest. This site was first founded as a Christian worship site by Irish missionaries who named the cell or kil in which the missionary lived after St. Martin of Tours, a fourth century saint who is said to have lived in this part of Scotland even before Christianity came here.

In other words, on this little ground where Christian villagers still worship and are still buried, generations of people worshiped God as Christians, from Celtic times, through Roman Catholic ages, and now as Presbyterian Christians. But here's the thing: although the folks here have been Christians for well over 1500 years, Christianity is a Johnny-come-lately to the glen.

Standing in the middle of the churchyard today looking out across the valley floor you are looking at the remains of people worshipping God, building sacred structures, stones aligned with the heavens, and burial cairns used in worship, for thousands of years before Christianity began. And, let me just add: the DNA of those first settlers here 12,000 years ago, who arrived following the end of the last Ice Age, is still carried in the folks who live there today.

I remember the day it struck me, standing in that churchyard, that people just like us have been worshipping God and standing in wonder in that same valley for thousands upon thousands of years through countless religions through historical eras and into prehistory. Whatever labels the people wore Neolithic (or New Stone Age), Bronze Age, Iron Age, Celtic, Catholic, Protestant, and all of the other names they've been known by, these people have lived and died and looked heavenward and looked inside, and wondered in awe right there.

I stand in wonder, too, as I said at the beginning of my remarks today, and in a wonder if anything more complete and overwhelming, when I try to fathom what it means when I read that a galaxy, such as the one Geoff recently sent me the story about, a galaxy boasts approximately 200 billion stars, and that there are over two trillion galaxies; or when I read that the universe as a whole is over thirteen billion years old, or when I note that if I were looking through a telescope tonight at one of our closest galactic neighbors, I would be literally looking at light that left there 210,000 years ago.

If we are not regularly reduced to silent, stunned amazement in the presence of the reality we inhabit, we aren't paying attention. And if the reality we inhabit doesn't knock the wind out of our hubris, we really have no clue as to our proportion in this vast web of being.

People often speak derisively about a "Me Generation." Usually they are pointing their fingers at someone whose behavior they interpret as selfish. But as with so many complaints, one finger pointing toward someone else leaves three pointing at the pointer. Humanity long settled into its multi-millennia-old "Me Generation."

It starts with the illusion of the isolated "Me," an individual who thinks they are separate observing everything else, thinking our little opinions cover the way things really work. And maybe that's why generations of the faithful and the unsure have so often turned their eyes toward the night sky to remember just how little they know, to recover that sense of wonder that reminds us of our due proportion, and that does this by reminding us also that this creation, far too great to comprehend, exists within that Being of Beings who made it all.

So, let us hear a word of sacred sanity, from the prophet Isaiah:

*"Have you not known? Have you not seen? Have you not been told from the beginning? Have you not realized from the foundation of the earth?"*

*"When God pulls up a chair, and sits upon the circle of the earth, all the inhabitants of the world are like grasshoppers in comparison. He stretches out the heavens like a curtain or like a tent under which we dwell. He brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth a vanity.*

*"The Holy One speaks, 'To whom will you liken me? Who do you think is my equal?"*

*"Lift your eyes on high, and behold, who has created all of these things."*

Amen.