

# **“When I Look at the Stars”**

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First Presbyterian Church Kingwood

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"Twinkle, twinkle, little star; how I wonder what you are, up above the world so high, like a diamond in the sky ..." Familiar words, aren't they? Most of us know them by heart. But do you know where they come from?

Actually, they come from a poem written in 1806 by a young woman named Jane Taylor. She was 23 years old when she wrote. And, as it turns out the original poem was longer. The words we know are only the first verse. Listen to the second and the third.

" When the blazing sun is gone, when he nothing shines upon; then you show your little light, twinkle, twinkle, all the night. Then the traveler in the dark, thanks you for your tiny spark. He could not see which way to go, if you did not twinkle so."

What do you see when you look at the stars? Jane Taylor saw diamonds in the sky, little lights that guided us. But Jane was a poet, not a scientist.

William Beebe was a scientist. He was one of the most celebrated scientists of the 20th century. He was 23 years old in 1901. And because of his reputation, on more than one occasion, Teddy Roosevelt invited Beebe to dinner at his home. According to Beebe's diary, sometimes after dinner, here's what happened next.

"At Sagamore Hill, Theodore Roosevelt and I used to play a little game together. After an evening of talk, we would go out on the lawn and search the skies until we found the faint spot of light-mist beyond the lower left-hand corner of the Great Square of Pegasus.

Then one or the other of us would recite: 'That is the Spiral Galaxy in Andromeda. It's as large as our Milky Way. It's one of a hundred million galaxies. It consists of a billion suns, each larger than ours.' Then Roosevelt would grin at me and say: "Now I think we're small enough! Let's go to bed."

A poet, a scientist and a President; different people but all their words point us to the same truth. When we stop to look, really look at the stars; something happens to us. Wonder enters into us. And David had the same experience. So he wrote a song about it and gave the song to his "Director of Music."

It was supposed to be sung "according to the Gittith." Nobody knows exactly what that means. It could be a tune but most scholars guess it was an instrument. And who knows? The "Gittith" could have been the great, great, great grandfather of the "Gittar." At least down here in Texas that sounds plausible, doesn't it?

Anyway, whether it was a tune or an instrument, the "Gittith" has long ago been forgotten. The music has faded away. But the lyrics remain because the words of Psalm 8 are evocative. When we read them out loud or silently to ourselves, suddenly we're there. We're there with David looking at the stars and experiencing, as he did, a sense of wonder.

And wonder is something that changes your orientation. I love the story Nancy Cheatham tells. "My sister," she says, "bought a new Lexus last year. It was loaded with high-tech options. The first time she drove the car in the rain, she turned a knob she thought would start the windshield wipers. But instead a message flashed across the screen. "Drive car 360 degrees." She had no idea what it meant. So when she got home, she got out the manual.

And she learned that while trying to turn on the windshield wipers, she had accidentally turned off the compass. And her car had lost its sense of direction. To correct the problem, the car needed to be driven in a complete circle until the compass pointed north. Then the navigation system would be oriented correctly again.

Well, folks, you may not have known it, unless you've read the manual recently. But it turns out that human beings have a compass too. And when it's working, it's oriented towards wonder, because wonder works in the human heart like a magnetic force pulling us toward God.

That's why I love Psalm 8. "When I look at the heavens," David writes, "the work of your fingers ..." Last week, Ben Patterson was with us as our Visiting Preacher. He helped us begin our summer sermon series on the Psalms. And I love what Ben said to me when I told him I was going to be preaching on Psalm 8 the Sunday after his visit. "When I think about Psalm 8," he said, "I always

think about verse 3" (that's the line I just read to you) "and I try to imagine 'the heavens' as God's needlepoint project."

It's a great image for after all, the Psalm says the heavens are the work of God's fingers, only a small demonstration of His power and glory. But enough! Enough to move us from wonder to majesty; from awe to praise. And when it happens, we feel it, don't we? Our life is turned around 360 degrees and our compass points toward God. We get oriented again to who God is; a personal being full of wisdom and beauty and strength. And over the next few weeks we'll look together at a few more of these "Psalms of Orientation" as some scholars call them and we'll see that each of them work in a similar way. They enable us to experience God as He really is.

That's what happened to David. That's why he names God the way he does in the beginning of Psalm 8. David calls Him simply "Lord." And the word in Hebrew shows us this Psalm is addressed to the "Lord of all," the Lord who created the needlepoint project of stars as only part of his work. But he did it so we could wonder at it. And we need to wonder at it. But of course we wonder far too little.

G.K. Chesterton, the brilliant British writer said once "The world is not lacking in wonders. What it lacks are creatures with time to wonder." So I wonder? When was the last time you let yourself wonder at the stars? When was the last time you walked out in your backyard on a clear night and spent sixty seconds looking, just looking at the stars?

If it's been a while, let me encourage you this morning. Take the time. Take time some night this week. Walk into your backyard. Look up at the stars. Don't say anything. Don't think anything. Just look! And let the wonder of what you see orient you. Let it lead you to say as David said, "Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth."

But then, as you say it, as you use the words of the Psalm as your own personal prayer, listen to all you're saying. For you're not only remembering who God is. You're remembering who you are too. That's why I love the words David wrote in verse 4. "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you set in place, what are mere mortals that you're mindful of them; human beings that you care for them?"

There's a great story about this question. And I want to take a minute to tell it to you. It's a story about Harvard University and a building there named Emerson Hall. You see Emerson Hall is named for Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Hall was built to house the Philosophy Department at Harvard. But when the construction was almost complete, Charles Eliot, the President of Harvard at the time sent a letter to William James, the famous philosopher. He invited James to suggest the words that would be carved over the main door.

James took some time to reflect on the invitation. Then he sent Eliot a line from Protagoras, a Greek philosopher; "Man is the measure of all things." But he never got a response to his letter. So when he saw stone masons working on a scaffold at the main door; their work hidden behind a canvas cloth James became curious. And in a few days, the canvas was taken down, he saw carved in stone not the confident words of Protagoras but the wondering question of David. "What is man that Thou art mindful of him?"

And I love to tell that story because it speaks of two completely different world views. One is the humanistic world view where "man is the measure of all things." And it seems when you first think about it as though that view of "man" exalts him. But the Psalm says that it doesn't exalt him nearly enough. For the Psalm says that men and women can't realize their true value until they ask themselves David's question and realize how much they are valued by God.

The words of Psalm 8 say that you and I need to learn how to measure our worth by realizing that the "Lord" of all whose fingers put the stars in place is also "our Lord" the one who takes us as His own. And because we belong to Him, Psalm 8 says five things are true of every one of us.

First God's mind is always full of thoughts about us. Second God is constantly caring for us. Third in God's eyes human beings are not just a little higher than animals. That's the way the world teaches us to think of ourselves. But in God's eyes, we are not a little higher than animals. We are a little lower than angels. Think about that as you look at the stars this week and I guarantee you it will make you smile.

Fourth, each of us is crowned according to Psalm 8 with part of God's glory and honor, for no two humans beings are exactly alike. And fifth and finally God gives each of us a unique role to play. The ruler of all gives us the task of ruling over some part of His creation.

Five ways that we matter to God. Five ways that we derive our worth from our relationship to Him. And if the five affirmations of Psalm 8 don't enable you to sense your value to God my friends, I don't honestly know what will. But the secret is to take time to think them, to remember them, to pray them out as you read this Psalm and we need to read it regularly. For the truth is we forget.

One last word and then I'm done. But since I began this sermon with a poem, I thought I'd end it with another. This one comes from a poet whose name you know. It's by Robert Louis Stevenson and as we finish this morning, as you listen to this think about its words in relationship to Psalm 8.

"The stars shine over the mountains, the stars shine over the sea. The stars look up to the mighty God, the stars look down on me. The stars shall last for a million years, a million years and a day. But God and I will live and love, when the stars have passed away."

*Let's pray ...*