Even though I am no longer a believer, I still sometimes read and think about the book of Psalms in the Old Testament. Just yesterday I had occasion to quote Psalm 8 to my wife. In the beautiful and most familiar (though completely non-inclusive!) wording of the King James Version, this is the psalm.

1 O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth! who hast set thy glory above the heavens.

2 Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength because of thine enemies, that thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger.

3 When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained;

4 What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?

5 For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour.

6 Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet:

7 All sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field;

8 The fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea, and whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas.

9 O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!

OK, I didn’t quote the whole thing to her, just verses 1a, 3-4. (As it turns out, I had meant in this post today to quote the same words, for reasons I’ll explain tomorrow).

The reason I quoted them had nothing to do with much of anything connected with the blog, but with a news story that I read yesterday, at the prompting of a member of the blog who wrote a comment directing me to it. It has to do with our universe.

For a few years now I’ve been intrigued by astronomy. I say that as someone who never took an astronomy class in college and who is woefully ignorant about the very basics of astral physics or anything else of much relevance. But possibly like you, I’m deeply intrigued by lots of things I don’t know about. (And OK, possibly also like you, I need to get the Great Courses 96-lecture – count them, 96 lectures – on the universe.) Even without any training, one of the things I’m intrigued by is just how vast the universe is. Fairly recently, of course, some astronomers have been arguing that ours may simply be one universe out of a vast multiverse. But even sticking to the universe we are starting to know, there is plenty to boggle the mind.

When I got interested and started watching lectures and shows on the universe, I was most struck by the enormity of it all. At the time, about five years ago, it was thought that there are about a 100 billion stars in our galaxy (our sun not being one of the big uns). And that
there are about 100 billion galaxies in the universe (and our galaxy not being one of the big uns). This is almost literally unthinkable. There is no way to get one’s mind around the enormity of the universe.

And then came a report from astronomers this past October, that these numbers may be a very, very serious underestimation. You can find the report in various venues, including a nice synopsis in The Atlantic:
http://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2016/10/so-many-galaxies/504185/ The short story: some astronomers are now arguing that in our universe there are not 100 billion galaxies but two trillion galaxies. That is 2,000,000,000,000 GALAXIES. Not stars. Galaxies. Suppose there are indeed 100 billion stars on average in these galaxies. Well, do the math and start adding the 0’s.

I was telling my wife about this article, and suddenly Psalm 8 popped in my head. Again, it says 3 When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; 4 What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?

The Psalmist lived in such a simple world compared to ours. There was no universe, no galaxy, no solar system. This earth was all there is. Above it is the firmament, which – as its name suggests – was a firm buffer between us and the place God lived in heaven. Right above the firmament was water (that’s why it rained, through the holes in the firmament; it had to be firm to keep the water out), and placed in the firmament (somehow) were the sun, moon, and stars which moved around inside of it. Below the surface of the earth is more water (which is where rivers, springs, and fountains, etc. come from).

That was it. It was all the author knew about. And yet, with just this earth beneath his feet and the firmament above, the author gazed in wonder at the enormity of it all, and wondered, how in a world of such mind-boggling size, magnitude, and grandeur, God could care for paltry human beings. God had so much else to care for, and the Psalmist was amazed that God could take time out to care for humans and even reveal himself to them. It took his breath away.

What would he think if he knew what we know today? I suppose he probably would think pretty much the same thing, but more so. But billions of trillions times more so? That’s asking a lot! Is it asking too much? It is interesting how different people respond. Believers probably respond with awe and immense gratitude, that despite the incalculable enormity of reality, God has shed his love and attention on them here on little ole earth. Unbelievers might respond with equal conviction that in a universe of this size (even if it’s not just one of an incalculable number of other universes) the idea that there is a God whose principle concern (or even one very minor concern) is with humans on this paltry planet in this paltry solar system in a paltry galaxy that numbers one of trillions is literally beyond belief. They simply can’t believe it.

I have one of these responses, and you may have the other. But whichever response we have, surely at root the response is the same, one of absolute awe at the greatness and magnitude of it all.

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