



Roanoke, Virginia

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“What Wonder Below”

Psalm 8, Genesis 1:26-28

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Psalm 8:

O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.
² Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.
³ When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
⁴ what are humans that you are mindful of them,
mortals^[a] that you care for them?
⁵ Yet you have made them a little lower than God^[b]
and crowned them with glory and honor.
⁶ You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
⁷ all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
⁸ the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.
⁹ O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!



Genesis 1:26-28:

²⁶ Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” ²⁷ So God created man in His *own* image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. ²⁸ Then God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

“Space: the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship *Enterprise*. Its five-year mission: to explore strange new worlds. To seek out new life and new civilizations. To boldly go where no man has gone before!”



So says Captain Kirk at the beginning of each episode of the original Star Trek series. In the series, Kirk and his crew explore the far reaches of space, visiting life-sustaining planets and dealing with many life forms; some friendly, some hostile. Captain Kirk even manages to find a few love interests in the far beyond. The series lasted only three seasons, but its popularity grew in syndication and still more through movies and spin-offs.

The popularity of the Star Trek franchise is tied in part, I think, to our curiosity about what- about who- is *out there*. Why should human potential and imagination be bound by these earthly coils? What human possibilities are available out there in the unseen and unknown?

There are many who dream of finding out. The hope of space exploration is so widespread that thousands of people are making down payments to be placed on waiting lists for seats on future space flights. The current full fare for Richard Branson’s spacecraft is \$450k.

Which means, William Shatner *got a bargain*. Shatner, who portrayed Kirk on the original Star Trek series and in the first of its movies was given the extraordinary opportunity to actually do what he had only pretended to do on sets and in front of green screens. About this time last year, at Jeff Bezos’ invitation, the 90-year-old actor became the oldest living person ever to travel into space by riding on the [Blue Origin space shuttle](#).

Variety magazine published an excerpt from Shatner’s book, *Boldly Go*, where he reflects on that experience.¹ After describing what it was to endure 3 g’s at liftoff, Shatner talked about what happened just after the crew moved past the grip of gravity. Others did what most would do, spin somersaults in the air and play with weightlessness. But Shatner stayed in his seat and stared out the windows.

He looked down and saw the hole the “spaceship had punched in the thin, blue-tinged, layer of oxygen around earth.” He then turned to see what he most wanted to see, the great beyond. He said he always loved “the mystery of the universe,” fascinated to learn of stars exploding,

¹ <https://variety.com/2022/tv/news/william-shatner-space-boldly-go-excerpt-1235395113/>



light taking years to reach our eyes,
entire galaxies existing in areas once thought devoid of matter entirely...
but, now in space, looking out into the final frontier,
all he saw was death...
“a cold, dark, black emptiness.”

Then he looked back toward earth. He could “see the curvature of Earth, the beige of the desert, the white of the clouds and the blue of the sky.” He saw *Life*; “nurturing, sustaining, life. Mother Earth. ...And *I was leaving her.*”

Shatner was shocked. The experience was the opposite of what he thought it would be. He thought that “being up there would be the next beautiful step to understand the harmony of the universe.” But the only possibility of life he saw was the place he left. For years, Shatner had been reading

of earth’s spoiling;
of the extinctions of animal species, flora and fauna
that took billions of years to evolve
and now exist no longer because of human interference.

And grief overwhelmed him. Shatner experienced what other astronauts have experienced and what has come to be called “The Overview Effect.” In space, as far as one can see, the *only* realistic potential for life to be counted on is a tiny blue orb, sitting so vulnerable and small in the vast expanse of space.

Shatner said the trip changed the way he looks at earth. For him, the true grandeur of existence is not to be found beyond the stars but on this planet in which we already live, because earth provides the only place we know of where life is possible. He said that if we can only gain this deep appreciation for what is unique about, it might give us “[a chance to rededicate ourselves to our planet, to each other, to live and love all around us.](#)”

Shatner’s is not the only perspective on the universe. Some might argue that Shatner was short-sighted in trusting only the black void of what he could see and not being amazed and excited about what could be out there in the seemingly infinite possibilities of space. Still, his perspective on what can be seen and known today raises an important question.

For planetary life in the future,
on what should we hang our hope?

Should our hope for life for future generations lie on what *might* lie beyond
or on what we already have?

Sure, space offers endless possibilities,
but earth offers *today’s*
air to breath,
water to drink,
food to eat.





For me, Shatner's vision from above reverses the awe and wonder of the poet of Psalm 8 who looks up. The poet of Psalm 8 stared into the night sky above filled with old wonder over what is beyond. Shatner looked at the earth below and was filled with new wonder over the planet on which we already live.

Shatner calls himself spiritual, but says he is not a religious man. So, I would guess that his wonder is largely over how incredibly *lucky* we are to be here. Look at all the accidents that have to be in place for there to be life on this planet:

- That the earth is the right distance from the sun to warm us rather than fry us.
- That the earth has an orbit that remains in an inhabitable zone rather than moving in and out of it.
- That the ozone can shield us from lethal radiation while also containing oxygen.
- That the earth has a moon that stabilizes our orbit and causes tides- and it is in tidal pools where life is thought to have begun.

I could go on, but you get it. With so many improbables in place, every person alive should be seen as winning some kind of cosmic lottery.

How amazing it is

that we are breathing right now.

How amazing it is that we not only exist,

but we are aware of our existence.

I accept the science, and it does inspire wonder. But believing in God as I do, I don't think of earth as an accident. I see it as a *gift*. With you being in worship with me, I think most of you agree. No one in this worship service has been given a seat on a billionaire's spaceship, but most everyone in this service believes that we have been given the gift of life on this improbable earth.

But, whether or not this inhabitable planet is an accident or a gift, should we not also consider its care a responsibility?



The Bible would say so and does so at the very beginning. In the first chapter of Genesis, earth's creation is described. For however the description fails according to scientific discovery (as if the Bible were written as a science book) it more than compensates with its moral vision of what it means to be human. On Days One-Three, we are given balanced realms that make life possible:

1. Heaven and earth,
2. Day and night
3. Deep sea and dry land



On days four through six, these realms are inhabited.

- The sun and moon are placed in the heavens to rule the day and night.
- Birds and fish inhabit the sky and seas.
- Creatures are placed to roam the dry land.

And among the creatures placed upon the land are humans; “male and female he created them.” There is something different about these creatures for there is placed within them the *image of God*. This means at least in part that humans are to be God’s representatives—God’s stewards—on earth. They are put in the garden to tend it and keep it. They are not put there to be owners of the land who are accountable only to themselves. They are put there to be stewards of the land accountable to God.

Progress is encouraged: “Be fruitful and multiply.” But, progress should not mean exploitation, expansion should not lead to extinction.

The reason is simple. As God’s representatives, we are here to love what God loves.

It doesn’t take much research in the Bible to discover that the later tradition of faith takes seriously this command for God’s people to care for the earth. Read through the Mosaic covenant and the prophets and you’ll find many commands to be stewards of the earth.

- Flora and fauna are to receive care.
- Land is to be given Sabbath rest by leaving fields fallow and rotating crops so that the land is not exhausted of its resources.
- Animal cruelty is forbidden, with it getting to the point where the prophet Isaiah calls for grain offerings to replace animal ones (Isaiah 66:3).

Yes, it’s all through scripture and tradition the faith of Israel has always had a strong relationship to the land with great respect for not only what the land can offer to us but what it needs from us.



I want to go back to William Shatner, whose acting career was built on portraying a captain of a ship that explores the beyond, but who is now, at the end of his life, worried about what will become of the earth we already have. He talks about all that he has read and heard about what is being done to the planet. We’ve heard and read it too. We’ve heard about

- pollution,
- extinctions,
- our contributions to global warming,
- and the human capacity to destroy most, if not all, of life on earth.



Of course, there are pollutions and extinctions that are unavoidable, but you know what I mean. You know that I'm talking about what could be managed and avoided, if only we would.

I could take a doomsday turn here, but you can do that for yourselves if you want. If reading of what could happen to our planet if we don't take care of it can inspire responsible action, well there's plenty out there you can read to get scared straight.

But, I do not want to do that. I want to go back to a better motivation to care for the earth. I want to go back to the *wonder of life*—of life being possible on this spinning planet which is so small in the vast expanse of the universe, but which offers *everything we need* to live, and breath, and love, and have our being.



I dwell on that wonder because I think that those who are most passionate about taking care of the earth are those who get lost in wonder. I include those who see this planet as a lucky accident. Those scientists who have studied what had to happen to make life possible and what can happen to bring life to an end can be passionate about taking care of *what we are lucky to have* because we won that cosmic lottery.

But I speak even more to those who are passionate because they see the earth and life on it *as gifts*.

- I think of fisherman who
 - see poetry in a good cast,
 - hear the music in the water,and want to keep our rivers and streams clean.
- I think of gardeners who are partners with the soil in seeing what can grow and want to see land treated with respect.
- I think of hikers, and bikers and horseback riders who find a forest to be something of a cathedral and fresh air as nature's wine and want to make sure that forest and woods not be spoiled.
- I think of poets who find nature to be a muse and thus want to protect its voice.
- And, I think of people of faith who sense the creator's hand behind creation and who understand that taking care of the earth is to take care of what is necessary for us to be our best human selves where we can love God and love what God loves.

Whether to care for what we are lucky to have

or to care for what we see as a gift,

may the number grow of those who want to be stewards of the earth so future generations can be so lucky...

or so gifted...

as we are today.

