

# Celestial Navigation

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



*Psalm 8; Romans 5:1-5*

Just about every night I have a Psalm 8 moment. Just about every night my little West Highland White Terrier – whom you met via picture a couple weeks ago – stands in front of me with tail wagging and eyes pleading and that is the sign that it is time for her to go outside and do her thing. And so on goes the leash and out the door we go and for about five minutes I am alone outside underneath the Florida night sky. There is nothing like the Florida night sky. The moon and the stars and the planets are everywhere. From horizon to horizon there is this light show of celestial bodies. And if I allow myself, if I pause to take it in, if I give myself over to imagining the scale of what is above me – the expanse of the universe – it nearly takes my breath away. And by the way did you happen to see last night the blue moon and next to it the planet Mars? Almost all alone hanging in the Eastern sky?

Now while this is happening – while I am taken with the enormity above me – at the end of the leash is my beloved canine friend who does not appear to be having the same experience. She has, instead, her nose in the grass sniffing out any possible smell she can smell. She is not impressed with the expanse above her. She is not filled with awe. She is not made to wonder about these points of light – she has her interest in other places. So tethered to each other these two creatures – human and canine -- are taking in the universe in very different ways. One with head buried, the other with head raised.

Perhaps it was some similar observation that made the Hebrew poet write,

*When I look at your heavens, the work  
of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars that you  
have established;*

*what are human beings that you are  
mindful of them,  
mortals that you care for them?  
Yet, you have made them a little lower  
than the angels,  
and crowned them with glory and honor.*

From its very first pages the Bible has made the case that when it comes to the created order we humans have been a given a particular place, a particular rank and we have been brought into a particular relationship with the creator. There is no other species like us. Just a little lower than the angels. Somewhere between the angels and the armadillos. Creatures who are aware, or who at least wonder, about our creator. I'm not sure my white furry friend wonders much about her creator. She wonders a lot about the dog across the street and is not shy in telling us about it – but she doesn't seem too concerned about where she came from. (She is not a wonderer.)

We humans are wonderers. When we look into the sky we wonder. When we consider each other we wonder. When we think to the future we wonder. When we look to the past we wonder. When we are struck by beauty we say it is “wonderful”.

We are wonderers.

And it is our wonder that prompts us to ask the human questions – questions again that no other species thinks necessarily to ask. We ask, for example, the why question. We want to know why? Why are we here? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do good things happen to bad people? Why do we die? Why did this person have to die? Why does life have to be so hard? Why do we have to fight each other? We ask the why question.

We ask the how question. How does the universe work? How does the law of gravity work? How did we come into being? How will it be when we die? How do you find the answer to this equation? How do you send a man or a woman to the moon or to Mars or to Jupiter? How do I get my remote control to work? We ask the how question.

We ask the when question. When will this happen? When will the plane depart? When will the rain come? When will the summer be over? When will I die? When will my children move out of the house? When will I get that phone call? When will they find a cure for cancer? When will Jesus return? When will this sermon be over? We ask the when question. We are wonderers. Why? How? When?

And because we are wonderers and question askers – our minds and our souls never quite rest until we find the answers. We want our answers. We are like Mitya in *The Brothers Karamazov* -- ‘one of those who don't want millions, but an answer to their questions’.

But what follows is the great human dilemma and the great human dilemma is – we are not going to get all the answers. There is only so much that we will come to know. There are only so many answers we will be able to find. There are only so many problems to which we will find solutions. We are just a little below the angels, but we are not angels. And the more we come to know makes us realize how much we don't know. It's one of the great discoveries of the human

**“There is one thing we know, one thing we can believe in, one thing we can set our hopes on – the celestial marker that gets us home – and that is the love of God for us and the love of God through us. ”**

quest, right? The more we know the more we don't know. When I was 16 I thought I knew everything! And I'm sure that made my parents so happy – that their son knew everything and wasn't afraid to share his knowledge. But one of the great discoveries is how much you don't know. I'm not sure my dog knows

about what she doesn't know. But we humans do. And it is this not knowing that makes us human beings anxious. We grow anxious over what we don't know. We have the questions but we don't always have the answer.

We grow anxious over the future because we don't know what the future will hold. We grow anxious over our health because we're not entirely certain how our health will hold out. We grow anxious over the stock market because we don't know what will happen in the world to affect it. We grow anxious over our children because we don't know what choices they will make. THEY don't know what choices they will make. We grow anxious over the course of our country because we don't know how the election will turn out. There is so much we don't know but the problem is we know that we don't know it – and that makes us a worried sort. We are a little below the angels, but we are not angels. Our quest is to reach our divine destiny – but we've got all these signals coming from places known and unknown and so few sign posts – and sometimes we can feel like we are flying by the seat of our pants. And it makes us anxious and afraid.

And I suppose a 24 hour news cycle doesn't much help. Have you ever noticed how much opportunity for anxiety there is in a cable news program? Oh my goodness. Just 30 minutes will tell you about the virus that is going to kill you, the burglar that is going to invade your home, the economic collapse that is right

around the corner, the person of a certain color or garb that is going to terrorize you, the storm system that is going to tear the roof from your house, the 20 foot reptile that is bound to show up in your closet. All these things we know could happen – and yet likely won't happen – and yet might happen. All because we don't know. We are close to the flight of angels but we are flying, we feel, by the seat of our pants.

And of course flying by the seat of our pants is another way of saying that we are flying without instruments. And to fly without instruments is the attempt to fly relying totally upon your own senses. Flying without instruments is to trust your own intuition. Flying without instruments is to not put to use the gauges before you. And sometimes that works until the skies get cloudy, the night gets dark, and the wind gets stiff – and all of sudden its hard to chart the course.

Life will do that sometimes won't it – throw its elements against us to pull us off course. Unexpected weather. Surprise events. Vexation of the soul. It's hard to fly when your soul is vexed. It's hard to fly when your heart is heavy. It's hard to fly when you're not sure how to pay the bills. It's hard to fly when your marriage is falling apart. It's hard to fly when you lost your job. It's hard to fly when the diagnosis is poor. It's hard to fly when you realize how much you don't know. If only there could be some fixed point – some celestial marker by which to set the course of our lives. Like some wise men who followed the star to Bethlehem...some heavenly beacon by which to navigate.

There's a scene in the movie *Apollo 13* where the crew of the imperiled spacecraft are trying desperately to get home and they have lost their instrumentation to guide them to that precise angle by which they would need to enter and pass through the earth's atmosphere without burning up – but without instruments there would be no way to find that angle unless they could find in space a fixed point by which to set their course. And it dawns on them to use the moon. To set the moon in the window of their craft and set their determinants upon that fixed point. If

only there could be for us some fixed point by which to set our lives. Some celestial marker by which to live – despite the night, the clouds, the wind...despite the lack of all the answers.

And I wonder if that isn't a little of what the apostle Paul points us to when he reflects upon the painful uncertainties of life. Paul was never afraid to talk about the painful uncertainties of life – mostly because a lot of his life had to do with painful uncertainties. Things did not always end up the way Paul thought they would end up. Life seemed always full of unexpected and unwelcome surprises. Shipwrecks, betrayals, imprisonment, riots, you name it. Paul knew his fair share of suffering and he wasn't afraid to talk about it. "We boast then even in our sufferings, because our suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts." It is I suppose a long way of saying that our hope – our fixed point as it were – the certain coordinates by which we direct our lives – this hope that does not disappoint - is to be found in the love of God poured into our hearts for us and the love of God through us. That though life is filled with all its unexpected turns and its unexpected elements – though there is much more that we don't know than we know – though the universe is filled with unanswered questions – there is one thing we know, one thing we can believe in, one thing we can set our hopes on – the celestial marker that gets us home – and that is the love of God for us and the love of God through us.

It is, I suppose, what Jesus was trying to get at when he got one of those ultimate human questions – not a why question, not a how question, not a when question – that one was a what question – What is the greatest commandment Jesus? What is the coordinate by which I set my life? What is the moon I set in my window? And Jesus says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul and with all your strength. And love your neighbor as yourself." When the wind wants to blow you one way. When the clouds make it hard to

see. When the night grows too dark to find any signs --- one thing is for sure – the love of God poured into you, the love of God for you, and the love of God through you. Love God. Love neighbor. That's it. You may not know what tomorrow is going to bring. You may not know what the stock market will do. You may not know what the doctor will say. You may not know what your boss will decide. But what we know – that the hope does not disappoint is the love of God for you and the love of God through you. Love God. Love neighbor. The fixed celestial point. The measurement by which we measure all other things.

In the aftermath of Dunkirk when the French and the Brits were being chased by the Nazi army to the shores of France – the Brits sent any ship they could to rescue whoever could make to the beaches there. One such ship the *Lancastria* filled up its berths with troops and civilians and just as she was pulling away got struck by a German bomb and began slowly sinking. From nearby a Roman Catholic priest could see these soldiers without any hope trapped in the hold of the ship – and did the only thing he could think to do – he jumped and swam his way into the hold of the ship where all the men were trapped. He climbed in to be with them and pray with them and sing with them. Later those who made it safely to England reported that the sound that could not escape their minds and the sound that strangely encouraged them was the sound of hymns being sung by those soldiers led by the priest.

So much there is we do not know. Why? How? When? What? We are little less than angels, but not angels yet. Celestial beings in the making. And on our way – celestial signs by which to navigate. Fixed points. A hope that does not disappoint. The love of God for us and the love of God through us.



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Church of the Palms

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