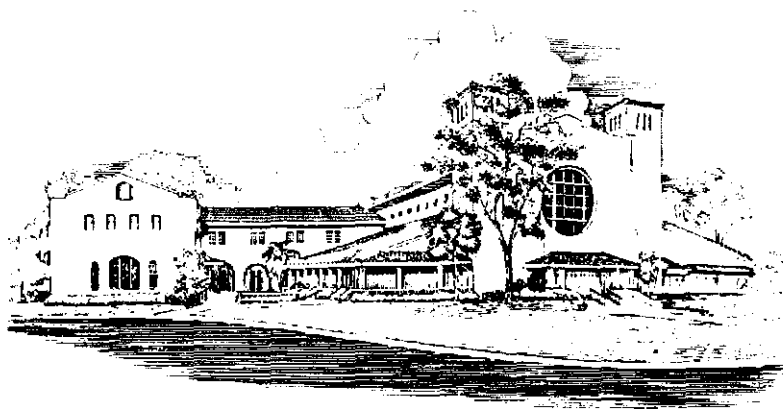


First Church Pulpit

"HALLEY'S COMET, THE EXPANDING UNIVERSE, AND... LITTLE OLD YOU AND ME"

Text: "When I look at the heavens, the work of my
fingers, the moon and the stars which thou
hast ordained, what is man that thou art
mindful of him?" — *(Psalm 8:3-4)*



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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In Nineteen Hundred and Ten, in a little town on the West Coast of the United States, three hundred people, most of them younger, formed a Halley's Comet Watch Society. They promised each other that they would take good care of themselves, and of each other, and of their world, so that when May of 1986 would come, the members of the Society would be there to greet the return of Halley's Comet, which comes back every Seventy-five years. In the passage of time, of course, they did not all survive to see it, but some are happy to tell you that many of them will be there in May. Some of them have already scanned the heavens and seen the opening of the Halley Show, and some of you in this very sanctuary and in our radio audience will be able to tell me, and tell your children, and your grandchildren of the times when twice you saw Halley's Comet.

It was first spotted Two Hundred Forty years before the birth of Christ by Chinese astronomers, who, Four Hundred years before that had recorded other comets. They took it to be a great and difficult omen. They had hypothesized that the gods were using the long, wide tail of the comet to sweep the sky clear of evil, and deposit it on Earth, so that terrible things happen when comets come.

Back before we domesticated the night with our shining electricity; back when the skies were dark and deep; back when kings and empires scanned the heavens and trembled to behold what might happen to them next; long before the Zodiac

was a kind of trivialized little curiosity piece in the daily newspaper, which we, for the most part, (not all) tease about; back when the night was awesome, the woods fearsome, when mankind was small and insignificant, and knew it, the arrival of Halley's Comet stirred the hearts of poets, and story-tellers, made kings quake in their boots, and caused loneliness to overflow, battles to be won or lost, and fear to terrorize the lonely little man or woman as they ranged the open steppe.

Halley's is one of a thousand known comets. 1986 will mark its thirtieth recorded appearance since 240 B.C. Punctually on time, it comes back every Seventy-fifth to Seventy-sixth year. I am proud and pleased to tell you that just last week with a pair of binoculars (the same ones, by the way, that I used in the Orange Bowl to watch my beloved Penn State lose its National Championship to a lackluster bunch of Sooners), I saw (or thought I did) in the Southern skies, the initial appearance of Halley's. Even with ordinary binoculars, although it is not scheduled to make its most luminous appearance until May, Halley's Comet (Pronunciation varies, depending on what part of the Halley-Haley family you belong to) can be seen, especially in the Southern Hemisphere.

Throughout history, the recorded sightings comprise a noble list of historical events. In the British Museum, recorded on a tablet from 164 B.C., there was mention

of the Babylonian fear surrounding the appearance. When Jerusalem fell in the late Sixties A.D., it was said that Halley's Comet hung like a sword above the sky. It was thought to be a fiery messenger of doom. An old Pastor-friend of mine told me that in 1910, thousands of Pastors in the country preached sermons on hellfire and brimstone and the damnation of the human race. Back in 1682 in New England when Halley's Comet appeared, there was a great revolution of evangelism and enthusiasm for the Gospel (Would that the same might happen now!). In 1066 William the Conqueror conquered, and of course it depends which side you were on, whether it was a good omen or not. In 1301 when Giotto did his marvelous Tapestry of the Nativity, he actually spread Halley's Comet and tail across the sky of the tapestry, hinting that the Star which led the Wise Men to Bethlehem could have been the one. In 1456 it was known the Turks invaded Belgrade and waited for the comet to depart before they moved.

Goodness knows the New Halley's Comet has become a cosmic celebrity. I mean, you can already buy Comet T-shirts! (Just wait for the next couple of months.) Someone told me that a rather clever bartender in Fort Lauderdale already has a Halley's Comet drink that you can buy. (Now please do not run out and buy it, but it is there somewhere and it should not be long before other similar items come along.) Back on November 7 in California, outside the NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory, two young astronomers with good eyes, jumped up

and down and yelled into the night, they said, "To entertain the coyotes", Charles Morris and Stephen Edberg. They were the first to sight it this time, or at least the first to have recognized it and recorded it.

I wonder if you know who Edmond Halley was. He was a great astronomer, master-scientist, genius, and a friend of Newton. Using Newton's theories, he figured out that the great comet which appeared in 1607 and back in 1531, and the one foretold by the ancients, was the very comet that he was observing in the English skies in 1681. He predicted it would come back again in Seventy-five years. Unfortunately, he never lived to see it. He died seventeen years too soon. But when it came, lo and behold, somebody remembered that Edmond Halley had predicted it, and while he never knew it (not on this side of the Great Divide, anyway), it took on his name.

Now stay with me, there is a Gospel lesson here. (You cannot get this kind of information in most churches !) If you have ever wondered what a comet was, or is, it used to be called a "disaster", that is, an "evil star". Men pondered through the centuries, but it was not until Fred Whipple came along (The favorite of the Whipple Effect), a young Harvard astronomer (at least then he was young, but then, everybody was young in 1949), developed a theory that a comet is nothing more than a kind of "dirty snowball"

in the sky. What is there is really a great big cold congealed ice and water and vapors and gasses ball, with the particles and dust of the universe gathered up and dragged along with it as it whizzes around the universe (Like the little ships inside Space Mountain at Disneyworld). Driven by the sun, the nucleus is composed of nothing very startling, just kind of an ordinary debris of the origin of the universe. It could shed some light on the origins of the Earth. The best theories say that Halley's Comet was formed near the beginning of the universe, Fourteen Billion years ago, or at least Three or Four. (Did you hear me?) Maybe billions of years ago. Then, as the planets Uranus and Neptune formed at the outer limits of the universe, unbelievably cold, the fragments which did not get in and stick to those outer planets became comets, or something like that. There could be millions of them, although, as I said, we only know about a thousand. So these icy fragments which could not really get attached to a planet, are forever doomed to whizz their way through space. (Wow! I wonder if they are lonely...) But think about it: For a couple of billion years, at least, Halley's Comet has been going 'round and 'round and 'round and 'round and 'round the universe, peeking in on Earth about every Seventy-five years, perhaps to see how we are doing. Would you like to enumerate or imagine all the things which it has seen?!

We have come a long way, my friends,

since the day when we thought the earth was a kind of round ball sitting on the top of an elephant, and even a long way from when we used to think it was flat. We know it is revolving around the sun, and that there are stars in our galaxy which are four hundred times as large as the sun is. The sun itself is a hundred times larger than the size of the earth. We live on a sphere which is moving forever, hurling itself through space with the centrifugal forces pulling it to Kingdom Come.... We talk about the "terra firma", don't we? How firm it really is! Stand out there tonight, some night, any night, and behold the vastness of it all....

Which reminds me of another night. (Are you listening?) When a man, I dare to say I know him better than many people that I have met and know on Earth, the writer of the Eighth Psalm, I am speaking of, who was standing out on a starry night in the Judean Hills, peering into the heavens, wondering what on earth was going on... on earth.... And as he looked up at the sky, he spoke those words I hope you will never forget, or pass over again. He said: "When I look at the heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars which Thou has ordained..." I mean, he might have said, "Isn't it all sort of pretty? Isn't it romantic?"

It's like Lucy came to Charlie Brown in the cartoon, staring into the sky.

She said, "When you look into the heavens, Charlie, what do you see? I see Orion, and the Big Dipper, and the Pleiades, and..." Poor Charlie Brown did not know what to say. He murmured, "I was going to say, 'When I look up there, I see a duckie, and a chickie, and a little doggie'..." (Ha! Ha!)

Or the Psalmist might have said: "When I look up there, isn't it just absolutely wonderful!" The sky is so inspiring, I think I'll write a poem.

Or "When I consider the heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars which Thou hast ordained, well, he might have said: "Isn't it terrifying?" "Those awesome spaces frighten me, how vast, how lonely..." Whitman wrote, "The whole finger of the universe is pointed unerringly at you." It is terrifying to bear that responsibility alone in the vast universe, where you are so insignificant, you hardly count at all... John Berryman looked at the stars and killed himself!

Or he might have said: "When I consider the heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars which Thou hast ordained..." he could have muttered philosophically: "It really gets your mind to thinking, doesn't it? I wonder who made it -- the imponderability of it all!" He could have said: "When I consider the heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars which Thou hast ordained, boy do I feel like

a lucky fellow, because you blessed me, Lord, so much! It makes me grateful to be alive and so blessed by you."

A lot of our religion is personal (selfish) that way. Think of the endless number of things that he might have said... (Because you and I have said them all, haven't we? Out on a starry night, wondering what on earth is going on on Earth...Wondering why God is giving you these burdens to bear...Wondering why the ones you love have to bear them, too...Wondering about your children, and you parents, and your friends.... We all have felt the emptiness or the blessing.

But, let me remind you what he did say:

When I consider Thy heavens,
the work of Thy fingers,
the moon and the stars, which
Thou hast ordained; What
is man, that Thou art mindful
of him? And the son of man,
that Thou visitest him? For
Thou hast made him a little
lower than the angels, and
hast crowned him with glory
and honor. Thou madest him
to have dominion over the
works of Thy hands; Thou
hast put all things under
his feet: All sheep and
oxen, yea, and the beasts
of the field: the fowl of
the air, and the fish of

of the sea, and whatsoever
passeth through the paths
of the seas. O Lord our
Lord, how excellent is Thy
name in all the earth!

"When I consider the heavens, the moon and the stars which Thou hast ordained, what is man?" The first thing he replied was, "Not much." Man is not worth much, is he? What is man that Thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that Thou dost care for him? Hmmm? I mean, he's a little bi-peded creature who struts around the earth as if he owned it all. Who is he? So long as his heart is beating inside his chest (Thump, thump, thump), he is fine, but let me tell you, I have been there (maybe you have, too) when the heart quits beating... He's not much when you look at him then. What is man? He is fine, tall and proud as long as his body temperature stays somewhere around 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit. Then he is able to at least get up in the morning and take nourishment...but let it vary a couple or more degrees this way or that way, and I tell you, when it does (I have been there too many times), he ain't much! When he turns cold, what is this man, Lord, that Thou art mindful of him? Why would you ever bother?

I mean, they said to Arthur Miller once, the great playwright, when they were asking him about the universe

and what he thought about mankind. It was a great interview. He got paid a fortune for submitting to it. The interviewer asked, "Mr. Miller, tell me, what do you think about the world?" Do you know what he said? "It ain't worth nothing! In fact, if you don't mind my coarse vocabulary," he said, "it stinks!" And the man asked: "But Mr. Miller, don't you have any hopes?" "No!" he replied. "None. I mean you just live out your day, there it comes and then it goes, and then another generation comes, and another generation, until the day will come when the sun will burn itself out and it all will be done." HMMMM. Big Arthur Miller. Somebody better pray for him.

And, they could say it to all the other characters, as you go through history, to Adolf Hitler: "What do you think about it all?" Adolf would say: "As long as you are just like me, and as long as you aren't Jewish, and as long as you aren't crippled, and as long as you don't have emotional trouble, and as long as you aren't too old, and as long as you aren't too young, and as long as you are a Nazi, you're O.K. with me, but by Golly, you depart from that and pffft...Off with your head! I don't need you anymore." You know what I mean....

What is man, the Psalm's author is struggling...and, I want you to struggle with it too. What is man, O God, that Thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that You care for him? Because,

you see... What is man? Nothing. But wait a minute, Arthur, Henry, Adolf, Tom, Alice, Blanche: He is everything! So is she! (Are you listening?) The whole world was made for him! Why do you think God made the world after all? Did He make it just to watch matter blow up and hurl itself through the expanding universe, one day to turn around and crush in upon itself again?

James Weldon Johnson, a favorite black poet of mine, says: "One day, God looked down and as a personal God, He was lonely, and so He said, 'I think I'm gonna make me a world!'" It's like one day when our first daughter was small. She was five years old or so. In the basement of our house (I was a good Dad -- I had a saw and a hammer and nails and some wood) I made her a store, right there in the basement. There was a window and a counter, which you could come up to, and there was a shelf, and we put some of Mom's groceries on it, and when you got to our basement, you might have thought you were on middle Fifth Avenue in New York City.

I was proud of my handiwork. "Look at it, Cath!" But do you know what she said next? "Daddy," she asked, "now will you make me some people to play with?"

I mean, what on earth good is the earth, if there are no people on it to play with, to love and enjoy, and be loved

by in return? "So," says James Johnson, "God made for Himself some little people. He told them to behave themselves and do what was right. But they didn't. It broke His heart, so out they went, outside the Garden. And the Cherubim were there to guard the way so they could not return. But His love was so great, He has spent the remainder of Creation trying to reunite them with Himself."

And now, as the comet whirls through space, 'round, and 'round, and 'round, He spends His whole life, God does, trying to get back in touch with those people He made, because He wants to be with them; and He wants them to be nice; and He wants them to be in fellowship; and He wants to hold them; and He wants to hug them; and He wants them to live forevermore.... Right? Even when we are not worth it (And we seldom are), God's love abounds.

So, what is man that He is mindful of him? Oh, he ain't much, really.... But he is Everything! Everything! Everything!

Let me close it with a story. I think you will like it. We started this sermon speaking about the last appearance of Halley's Comet in 1910, and that little society which got together, remember? The ones who were going to be there when Halley's Comet returned in 1986, right? Well, one of those who will see it again

is Edmond Halley, a great-great-great-great-great-grandson of the very one after whom the comet was named, even though he was gone before the comet came back after his death and they named it for him then, remember? Well, in 1910 there was another Edmond Halley there, he was Seventy-six years old, old Edmond was. That is pretty old, but it is also pretty young. And, his young grandson was also there, aged Ten at the time; born at the turn of the Century, also named Edmond. The Elder Edmond (76) on that night (It's true), said to his grandson, "Son, you see, I will not be there in 1986 when the comet returns, and neither will your father, but I trust you will. So, take good care of yourself; take good care of the Earth; take good care of "our comet", because I want you to be there to greet it when it comes back in 1986."

So, just before we go, do you know what is planned for a night this coming spring out in Stockton, California? I hope I shall be able to go. Edmond Halley, now Eighty-six (The one who was Ten when Halley's last was here), is going to call his three great-grandchildren together, ages five, seven and nine; Ryan is the seven-year-old. He will sit them down and charge them, saying something like: "Now children, I am not going to be here in 2061 when Halley's Comet comes back, but I expect you to be there. Until then, I want you to take care of yourselves; and, I want

you to take care of this world; and I want you to work for peace and brotherhood and love and justice and hope and promise.... And take care of 'our comet', too. Will you? Because I want you to be there when it comes back in 2061, and others of our family to be there in 2136 and in 2211 and in 2286 and in 2361 and in 2436 and in.... I want you to be there, as the comet goes 'round and 'round and 'round and 'round...."

So, take care of the gift of life God gave you! Take care of the world. Defend our peace and freedoms, each and every one of you, and who knows...? When Halley's comes back again, maybe you will be there to greet our lovely comet, sweeping evil from the skies.

Greet the comet, but more, greet our Christ, Who brings and gives and takes and gives again, for now and evermore. Amen!