



*Picture taken by Lee Foster,
Foster Films, Canada. Used with permission.*

Monday Musing: March 31, 2025.
Heaven...

Isn't this lovely!? This is a picture my son Lee sent to me: The Heavens Above the Earth Below. What does that really mean? Just look at those stars. How far away are they? Why are they? What is heaven?

Hiking in the day, Karen and I don't get to see the stars, or the heavens above us.

Very briefly, the ancient Hebrew people believed in a cosmology, that is, an accounting of the universe, as a flat, disc-shaped earth surrounded by water, with a solid dome-like 'firmament' above (sky) and an underworld below. God dwelled above the firmament. When a person died, they had simply gone to 'death,' sometimes said as Sheol; Sheol did not mean hell. There was no place of eternal punishment in the ancients' view. Death was when life left a person. The Jews exiled to Babylon were there exposed to new ideas which they assimilated into their beliefs and brought back with them to Jerusalem when the exile was over.

The ancient Greeks believed in a cosmology that was intertwined with mythology in some ways similar to the ancient Hebrew beliefs. There was a flat earth surrounded by a solid sky and an outer ocean. In time, it was believed that the earth was at the centre of what we would call the universe, and the sun, moon and stars surrounded the earth. Ancient Greek astronomy demythologized the myths of how the cosmos came to be as they began to systematically study the world. Yet there was still the flat earth, the heavens, the sea, the netherworld until they began to understand more.

Understandings of heaven and hell evolved through time. The firmament and the place above, what came to be heaven for the heavenly host and God evolved. The changing nature of death and where one went at death, whether Sheol, or later Hell, happened over many centuries. Jesus' followers came to focus on rewards and punishments at death, that led to views of heaven and hell that many still believe in today.

The question of heaven, and of hell, is pertinent for us. Our cosmology, our knowledge of the universe, is where the earth and other planets and stars form our galaxy, The Milky Way, which moves in space with countless other galaxies, and all this within an expanding universe. And there is no up or down. There just is. And this is what our children are learning in school. It is all so fascinating and wonderful. And it is very different from our scriptures. And our hymns. Just take some time and explore what the scriptures say about the heavens and remember those words come from ancient Hebrew, Greek and early Christian beliefs. Then take some time and explore the lyrics of our hymns. What do they say about heaven and hell and where God is? I think you'll find, as I did way back when, that the ancients and the old hymns did not write

about the universe as we know it today. They wrote what they saw, and they believed in their time.

So where is heaven? Or how might we conceive of heaven differently? Instead of thinking of where it is or isn't, what about what it might be or not? I believe over the years as kids left Sunday school, and therefore church, they left with a Sunday school understanding of God, Jesus, heaven and hell, and all that the old stories told, and the old hymns sang. And as they grew up, they discovered those old stories, like Santa and the Tooth Fairy, just didn't make sense anymore – at least as they'd learned them. So why go back to church that still taught the ancients' cosmologies?

I have also found that those who stayed, learned and grew in faith in such a way that an understanding developed through their lives that allowed those who stayed to weave the ancients' beliefs with today's knowledge, and hold the meaning together as descriptors of ancient wonderings and modern facts. Doing so meant deeper meaning, deeper faith, a faith to suit them well through the years, a spiritual faith.

In the heavens, there are nebulae, cold clouds of gas and dust, also called the Stellar Nurseries for it is here stars are formed. Stars are born. And this is God's wondrous world. No up. No down. The heavens. A wonder to behold. A wonder to imagine.

May this world know peace, Rev. Deb Foster, Minister
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Prayer

Holy God, Holy Mystery, Holy Love, we come to know you in different ways, Out of our own and different experiences, and we come then to believe and to live out of what we hold as true. May we also have the courage to learn and to grow, to expand and deepen our knowledge, our experiences, and our beliefs, that they might grow with us as we grow old, as we come to need an older, wiser, deeper knowledge of you, for our hearts, and for our souls, Holy God, Holy Mystery, Holy Love. Amen.

Scriptures for the Fifth Sunday of Lent

Isaiah 43:16-21	Look, I am doing something new.
Psalms 126	Those who sow in tears reap with joy.
Philippians 3:4b-14	I count everything as loss but knowing Christ.
John 12:1-8	Mary anoints Jesus with costly ointment.

TR Question (theological reflection)

How do we teach our very smart young people to weave the wisdom of the ancients with the knowledge of today and find God in the midst? How have your beliefs about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, heaven and hell changed as you've grown older? Why?

