

Psalm Thirty-Six

Transgression speaks to the wicked
deep in their hearts;
there is no fear of God
before their eyes.

For they flatter themselves in their own eyes
that their iniquity cannot be found out and hated.
The words of their mouths are mischief and deceit;
they have ceased to act wisely and do good.
They plot mischief while on their beds;
they are set on a way that is not good;
they do not reject evil.

Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the clouds.
Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains,
your judgments are like the great deep;
you save humans and animals alike, O LORD.

How precious is your steadfast love, O God!
All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.
They feast on the abundance of your house,
and you give them drink from the river of your delights.
For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light we see light.

O continue your steadfast love to those who know you,
and your salvation to the upright of heart!
Do not let the foot of the arrogant tread on me,
or the hand of the wicked drive me away.
There the evildoers lie prostrate;
they are thrust down, unable to rise.

It may be hard to believe that it has only been 60 years since the first human journeyed past the earth's outer atmosphere. It has been less than a lifetime since Yuri Alekseyevich Gagarin became the first person to travel into space. In the decades that followed, of course, technology and space travel have progressed by quantum leaps, such that many of us will scroll past headlines about missions to Mars and the moon without a thought.

But it is truly remarkable to think consider that it has only been a few decades – the smallest sliver of time - since people have managed to achieve those feats. For the rest of history, the possibility of crossing those sorts of distances was simply unimaginable.

It is with that perspective that we are invited to view Psalm 36. For most of us today, the heights and depths that are described make for nice poetry, but are likely not all that impressive. Each day, after all, hundreds of thousands of people ascend above the clouds on commercial aircraft (v.5). Four thousand people and counting have summited Everest (v. 6a). Submarines and other underwater craft continue to plumb the depths of the world's oceans (v. 6b).

Try and step outside of all of that for a minute, though, and take in these words as an early reader: *“Your love, O LORD, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds. Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains; your judgments are like the great deep”* (vv. 5-6).

I once read an estimate of the average distance that an ancient person traveled in their lifetime, compared to that of someone today. In David's day, no one would have ever dreamed of breaking free of the boundaries that he describes in these verses.

And so that is what God's love is like, he tells us. Like the heavens, the clouds, the mountains and the floor of the sea, God's love is a reality that lies beyond the limits of our understanding. People in that time had no clue what was in those places or past them. There were myths, and what we might call proto-scientific speculations, but it was otherwise a great mystery to them. That, we are told, is what our knowledge of God's love is like.

Likewise, we are meant to understand that God's love is a reality that extends beyond the limits of where we might go, and what we might do with our lives. Try as we might, we cannot out-travel God's love for us. It is wider than the widest cosmic circumference we could ever conceive of.

Here, we are reminded of the words of another Psalm: *“Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heave, you are there; if I make my bed in [the depths], you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.”* (139:7-10).

Like the thought of those enormous distances, these spans of Divine love, righteousness and judgment were meant to evoke wonder, fear and awe. They also seem to contrast the smallness of the efforts of the wicked, whose actions the writer laments at length in these lines.

Rather than seeing and being swept up in expansiveness of God, they seem self-confined to their own cramped quarters. They stare at themselves in the mirror (v.2a), sit in bed scheming (v.a) and in the end lie in place, unable to get up (v.12). They are content to seek out and trample on others (v.11) rather than let their feet lead them to the temple to encounter and explore the wideness of God's mercy (v.8a).

In the past century, humanity has stretched its reach exponentially. Yet much remains a mystery to us. The further out we see and travel, the more we realize is beyond our reach. And so the words of this psalm remain as true as ever. God's love extends further still. How precious, indeed, it then is (v.7). – NS

For this reflection I relied on James Waltner's commentary on the Psalms (Herald Press).