

## Bible Study - Session 3

# *Sky Sunday*



## **GOOD NEWS FROM SKY**

### **Earth Readings: Jer. 4.23-28; Psalm 19.1-6**

#### **Beginning**

The theme of our study is the voice of creation, or more specifically the way which the sky not only announces and celebrates God's presence, but also sympathises with creation when it suffers.

**Have you ever watched the skies when a storm was brewing, black clouds rolling in like wall after wall of waves? Have you ever had a sense of God's presence in the storm or God's voice in the thunder as many ancient peoples did? (Note Psalm 29!) Have you ever sensed that eerie feeling that comes during an eclipse when all the animals are spooked?**

Why is the sky so important to us? Our moods seem to change with the weather—when the sun shines we are likely to be happier than when darkness covers the sky. Why? What does the sky mean to us? Is our faith influenced by the sky or related to the sky in some way?

## **Background**

An important piece of background information for this Bible study is that most times when the text of the Old Testament reads ‘heavens’ the original Hebrew could, and probably should, be translated ‘sky’ or ‘skies’. In other words, texts that we often associate with heaven as the abode of God actually refer to that part of creation we call sky.

The point is well illustrated by considering Day Two of creation in Genesis One. The text describes how God divides the primal waters and constructs a ‘dome’ to separate the waters above from those below (Gen. 1.6-8). This dome or firmament God calls ‘sky’. On Day Four God places lights in this sky/dome—sun, moon and stars (Gen. 1.14-18).

The word for sky in these two texts is precisely the same word found in Genesis 1.1 which should be translated: ‘In the beginning when God created sky and Earth...’. Genesis One is about God creating the physical universe, not the spiritual domain of heaven as the unseen abode of God.

It is the role of this physical domain we call sky that is the focus of our study.

**Discuss: Recall some texts from the Old Testament that you have associated with heaven. Do they refer to the sky or to some other domain? Do you recall any texts where the sky responds to what happens on Earth?**

Note how the windows of sky/heaven open in the Flood story (Gen. 7.11). Compare also the promise to Abraham (Gen. 15.5) and the bread that rains down from sky/heaven (Exod. 16.4).

## **Exploring the Text**

### ***Read Jeremiah 4.23-26***

The reading from Jeremiah is a vision of what it will be like when the great enemy comes from the North to overwhelm God’s people and devastate the land. The disaster he sees coming is so destructive he depicts the event as if it were a reversal of the original acts of creation. To understand this vision we need to return to the events of Genesis One. Consider the following:

Compare v. 23 with Gen. 1.1: Return to pre-creation – all is ‘waste and void’

Compare v. 23 with Day One: No light in the sky

Compare v. 25 with Day Five: No birds in the sky

Compare v. 26 with Day Three: No vegetation comes from the land/Earth

Jeremiah’s vision turns the whole of the original creation process upside down. This portrait, moreover, is more than a metaphor. For Jeremiah the destruction brought about by the invading armies of Babylon and the subsequent fall of Jerusalem was

more than a national catastrophe. The countryside of Canaan was also affected. War brings environmental devastation.

***Read Jeremiah 4. 27-28***

Jeremiah closes his vision with a forceful announcement that the desolation will be so great that creation will respond with empathy. Earth will 'mourn' and the skies 'turn black'.

In other passages Jeremiah speaks of Earth mourning and the land crying aloud to God. These passages are more than poetry. They highlight how Jeremiah senses the sympathy of nature, the groaning of creation. Because of the wickedness of the people, he cries to God:

How long will the land mourn? (Jer. 12.4)

God responds by saying:

They (the people) have made it a desolation;  
desolate it mourns to me'. (Jer. 14.11)

In our reading from Jeremiah 4, it is not only Earth but also sky that responds. The sky that has lost its light and its life 'grows black' (4.28). The expression 'grow black' also means to be gloomy, mourn and be depressed (cf. Job 5.11).

In other words, the imagery of Jeremiah can be compared with that of St Paul in Romans 8. All creation, both Earth and sky, suffer and groan because of the evils perpetrated by God's people.

**Discuss: Have you experienced the sky responding to human evils? What are the signs in the sky that indicate sky is suffering or mourning? Are there people today like Jeremiah who are sensitive to the empathy of creation, including the sky? Cite poets or people that you know who are sensitive to the suffering of sky.**

**Conscious of the Crisis**

The distant sky that we call space is not something we humans have influenced greatly, in spite of our effort to 'conquer' space. The more immediate sky that we call our atmosphere, however, has been affected greatly by numerous human acts of abuse.

We have created a hole in the ozone layer. By excessive use of various sprays and chemicals we have released chlorofluorocarbon molecules into the atmosphere. In the stratosphere chlorine atoms escape from these molecules and attack the ozone molecules. The resulting 'hole' first appeared over the South Pole, but the ozone layer is thinning over other continents. Because of this thinning, UV rays from the sun have now increased and so have skin cancer rates.

There are many ways in which we have polluted our skies. The combustion of fossil fuels in factories and cars produces a host of noxious materials that fill our skies. One of the common effects is smog. Air pollution is no longer a crisis we can avoid.

I recall being in a fifth story apartment in Mumbai (Bombay) some years ago. I rose early to watch the dawn. I did not see the sun rise over the horizon! The smog was so dense it took another half an hour before the sun came up over the smog and appeared.

**Discuss: How has the pollution of our atmosphere, our immediate sky, affected your life or community? Identify other violations of our sky that must be faced if we are to have a healthy planet in the future.**

### Exploring the Text

#### *Read Psalm 19.1-6*

Many of us have been conditioned to think that only humans communicate the mysteries of God. We do not expect other parts of creation to have a voice like that of humans. Butterflies do not talk. Trees do not sing the way we do. Skies do not communicate.

Psalm 19 indicates just the opposite. Many Psalms, like Ps. 148, celebrate the way trees sing, fields rejoice and the rest of creation praises God. This Psalmist invites all creation—including sea monsters and storms—to praise the Creator!

Sometimes we think this kind of talk is but poetic language, giving human voice to non-human reality. Psalm 19 suggests that the voice of creation is more than a poetic way of praising God. All creation is here communicating about—and with—the Creator.

In this Psalm the sky proclaims good news in its own way, not a human way. The sky is the mediator of God's word. The sky announces two things—the vibrant presence of God and the creative work of God.

The skies 'declare the glory of God'. The glory of God is the visible presence of God in creation, a presence that permeates all of Earth. Isaiah 6.3 assures us that the glory, the visible presence of God, 'fills' all of Earth, just as it once 'filled' the tabernacle in the wilderness and the temple of Solomon. If we have eyes of faith, we can see the presence of God shining through creation. The sky proclaims that glory, that presence on Earth. And that is good news, good news from sky!

The sky also announces the work of the Creator everywhere in Earth and sky. The firmament God created above is the story of God's work above and around us. The sky is a testimony to the creative forces of God currently at work. Creation continues into the present!

The Psalmist goes a step further and declares that the voices in the sky are a conversation between one day and the next. Light communicates with light and darkness with darkness! The messages in creation are not only from the sun and the

moon, but via light. One wonders whether the Psalmist had some appreciation that light is in fact a succession of waves that connect with each other.

The communication that fills creation is not dependent on human words. It is the pulse of God's word penetrating all of creation announcing the good news that God's presence and creative power permeates every part of the cosmos. This living creation also celebrates God's presence. And we are invited to join the rest of creation in worshipping our Creator.

**Discuss: Contrast the good news from sky celebrated in this Psalm with the sympathy of sky that arises when we pollute our atmosphere. Give examples of when you had a sense of the good news from sky that the Psalmist proclaims here. What do you think are the main messages of that good news?**

### Exploring the Text

#### *Read Mark 15.33-39*

In Mark's description of the passion of Jesus Christ, we again meet the sympathy of sky. He tells us that from noon on the day Jesus was crucified, 'darkness came over the whole land'. For three hours, while Jesus hung in agony on the cross, the sky was dark. Or, in the language of our reading from Jeremiah, the sky was 'mourning'

If we recognise this darkness, we gain an even greater appreciation of Jesus' final words. He is crying into the darkness when he yells: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.' The signal from sky is that all is darkness; even God is absent in that dark hour. It is in this darkness that Jesus gives a loud cry and breathes his last. It is in this darkness that the curtain of the temple is torn in two.

That action indicates that the very darkness, the temple veil that hides God from humans, has been rent asunder. The sky is open and God is accessible. In Luke's Gospel this rending of the veil is directly linked with the darkness covering Earth. Now the cosmos is God's temple and God's presence is everywhere. Once again, there is good news from sky.

**Discuss: Imagine if you were at the foot of the cross and everything became dark, as in an eclipse. What would you think? How would you feel? Why is this darkness an important part of the passion narrative?**

### Connecting with Christ

The Old Testament texts spell out the sympathy of sky and good news from sky. The Gospel reinforces the sympathy of sky that accompanies the passion narrative of Jesus. Is Christ still connected with sky in any way? Does the story of the ascension of Jesus suggest that he went through the clouds into the sky somewhere?

The Epistle reading (Phil. 2.9-13) declares that after his death, Jesus the Incarnate One, was exalted and given the highest name. The text goes on to say that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, whether in heaven/sky, on Earth or under Earth. Christ becomes Lord of the entire universe, including the domains of the sky.

The sky that once responded to Jesus' death responds in praise to Jesus' exaltation as the cosmic Christ.

That does not mean that Jesus is located specifically in sky or some domain of sky. According to Ephesians (1.9-10, 23), the cosmic Christ gathers all creation into himself. Moreover, this cosmic Christ fills all things, all the cosmos.

In other words, the risen Christ is not located in one place, whether that be called heaven or sky. Christ holds all things in the cosmos together and permeates all things in the cosmos. And that is good news for sky as well as for us.

**Discuss: When you pray to Jesus Christ, where do you locate him in your mind or your faith? How big is your Lord? A figure on a throne in the sky? Or a presence that permeates everything?**

### **Closing with Praise**

Song: The following song celebrates the reality that the God whose presence rules the skies was revealed to us in one piece of stardust, called Earth. The melody is the well-known hymn 'Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken'.

### **SONG OF SKY**

Lord of suns and star exploding  
Galaxies and swirling skies,  
Where you chose to show your glory  
Took the heavens by surprise.  
Lord of solar winds and wisdom,  
Super stars that blow our mind,  
Choosing such a fragile planet  
Hardly seems a grand design.

On this piece of stardust swirling,  
On this spinning spot in space,  
Life itself was born like music,  
When you showed your hidden face.  
What an honour to be chosen,  
Silent planet blue and green,  
Filled with glory, grace and gardens,  
Where the breath of God is seen.

What is even more amazing  
We have poisoned Earth like fools.  
Help us change our way of living,  
Love the Earth and love her rules.  
Help us stem the tide of traders  
Leaving Earth an empty store;  
Join us now Creator Spirit,  
Come renew your Earth once more.

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in *Habel Hymns Volume 1*

*Prayer:*

*Christ, whose cosmic presence fills creation,  
help us sense the sympathy of the skies  
and hear the message proclaimed from above  
so that we may praise your name  
with all the voices of creation. Amen.*

