In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Dear friends, I believe that there is spiritual hunger in our town. There are hungry hearts here. That was my initial intuition behind the pastor’s booth. For all the steadiness, even bravado, with which New Yorkers carry on their work and their lives, some of them carry heavy hearts. Some of them even carry doubts about the meaning of life. That is why I think it is so important for the church to lift up the doctrine of creation. We want our neighbors to know, and in knowing to be encouraged, that their lives do not amount to collections of cosmic dust, but rather they are the beloved people of Almighty God. They are human beings made by God who is eager that the world should not be without them.

And so we come to my text for this morning. It is a delightful verse from Isaiah 40, which is a chapter with many wonderful verses. It is a passage that speaks of the stars. My theme will be that as surely as God creates the stars, so surely he creates you and me. Our text goes this way:

26Lift up your eyes on high and see:
   Who created these?
   He who brings out their host and numbers them,
   calling them all by name;
   because he is great in strength,
   mighty in power,
   not one is missing.

In the context of Isaiah’s argument, this passage about the stars is part of his case against idolatry. Some idols are made by hand. The craftsman chooses the metal or the wood and fashions a figure before which he or others worship. Isaiah thinks that such handmade idols are ridiculous. But there are other idols too. These are not handmade but are part of our vast world. Stars are a good example. Ancient people used to worship the stars. They thought them divine. Now Isaiah comes along, and on behalf of the Lord, claims that the stars are not divinities but rather lights made by God and placed in the sky. And that is absolutely true.

But what pleases me so much about this passage is not so much the polemic against idolatry but simply the notion that our God creates things. In fact, he creates everything, even the stars. The number of the stars is an ancient image of infinity. “Go outside,” the Lord says to Abraham,
“Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” (Genesis 15:5, RSV)

That means that Abraham is going to have lots of descendents. If his descendents should match the stars in number, then he is going to have lots of descendents because there are lots of stars. And the Lord made every one of them! There is no star floating in the whole universe that is somehow a random ball of fire unconnected with God. No! Every one of them has been created by God. Isaiah says that the Lord not only numbers the stars but also calls them all by name. We might not know their names, but the Lord knows and loves each star. “Good morning, Polaris. Good morning, Sirius.”¹ Our God has a big heart.

Today’s Psalm also speaks of the Lord naming the stars. And so Psalm 147 says this about the Lord:

⁴He counts the number of the stars and calls them all by their names.
⁵Great is our LORD and mighty in power; there is no limit to his wisdom. (Psalm147:4-5, LBW)

Not only does the Lord create and name the stars, but he also creates their movements. He creates the laws by which they move. He creates the laws the astronomers and physicists are privileged to study.

For a fellow who grew up on Star Trek, the notion of the stars and other galaxies and maybe even “new worlds and new civilizations” still holds fascination. But however many stars and worlds and civilizations there may be, they are all created by our good God.

And if our God creates the stars and names each one, even more does he create and name you and me. Remember Psalm 8:

³When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast established;

⁴what is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him?

⁵Yet thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honor. (Psalm 8:3-5, RSV)

¹ Wikipedia has a list of names of stars: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_proper_names_of_stars
Even more important, Jesus died not for the stars but for you and me.

Carol once told me a conversation she had had with an elderly resident of the Wartburg. The old woman said that Psalm 139 was her favorite Psalm. Carol said that it was hers too. Carol wondered why the old woman loved it so much. Well, she loved it because the Psalm speaks of God’s creation of each of us. Verses 12 and 13, for example, are addressed to the Lord and say this:

12For you yourself created my inmost parts;*
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.
13I will thank you because I am marvelously made;*
your works are wonderful, and I know it well. (Psalm 139:12-13, LBW)

The elderly lady told Carol that her mother had told her that she was “her father’s mistake.” That was a terrible pain for a child to bear. But then the old woman read Psalm 139 and suddenly she was able to answer, “No. I am not my father’s mistake. I am created by God!”

It is entirely natural, then, that Isaiah should hurry on from the stars to speaking of the people, including the weary and weak people. The Lord, Isaiah says, “gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless” (Isaiah 40:29, NRSV). Some of the people who sit down at my pastor’s booth are not elderly. They might be young and strong, but they are nigh exhausted. It is as Isaiah says:

30Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted; (Isaiah 40:30, NRSV)

Indeed, some of you might be feeling this way--faint, weary, and close to exhausted. You have been laboring in the field a long time. You have been enduring uncertainties. You have been carrying burdens with grace and skill, but you are about played out. If so, Isaiah would have us remember the multitude of stars and how the Lord attends to each one, and even more how he attends to you and to me. Wait on him, Isaiah says:

30Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
31but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint. (Isaiah 40:30-31, NRSV)
He means wait with hope! When Isaiah says to wait for the Lord, he means wait with perfect confidence that the Lord shall renew our strength. Physicians might not be able to do it, medicine might not avail, diet and exercise might not be enough, but the Lord shall renew our strength. Wait for the Lord with confidence in him and with a waiting that rings true to Jesus. After all, it is hard to say that we were really waiting for Jesus if we are not even trying to live a life worthy of him. Wait for Jesus, not in some idle way of waiting, but rather wait for him with an energetic striving to be good and loving in this world and willing to leave all the rest to Jesus. Do that, and the Lord will supply the rest. Wait upon the Lord and he will renew our strength.

Now we are ready to enjoy this morning’s gospel story. It is about Peter’s mother-in-law. She lies ill in bed. The expectations of hospitality are such that we can bet that she would have loved to be up and serving folks, but she just cannot make it. She lies in bed sick with a fever (Mark 1:29). We get the picture of a good person who wants to do good, but who is played out. This is precisely the kind of person our Lord is glad to help. So Peter’s mother-in-law waits at home, and in the course of time, Jesus comes. He does not hesitate, he does not even ask her whether she would be well. Instead he takes her by the hand and heals her:

31 And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her; and she served them. (Mark 1:31, RSV)

Jesus permits the woman to do the good she in fact did: she served them.

So it will be with us. The Bible says that we were built for good works that we might walk in them:

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:10, RSV)

So let us walk in them as best we can here and now. But let us also look forward with joy to that time when Jesus increases our strength and permits us to mount up with wings like eagles, soaring in good works and a holy life worthy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.