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Heavenly Preaching

James Calvin Schaap

“The heavens declare the glory of God”

In a sense, you could set your clock to the sun. I’m not sure who determines such things, but if you’d like to know exactly when dawn will arrive tomorrow morning, you can check any of a dozen readily accessible sources. People know. It’s determinable. Count on it.

What you can’t count on is exactly what it will look like. A dawn is a dawn—the sun nudges itself

up from the horizon and spreads its own glorious gold over the world; but no two dawns are exactly the same.

For the last few years, I’ve been a chaser of the dawn. A couple times a month, camera in hand, I hunt dawn’s early light the way some folks hunt deer. I chase over empty country roads, gravel cracking up in my wheel wells, trying to get to the best possible place at the best possible time for the best possible shot.

More often than I care to admit, I come home empty-handed. Last Saturday, rain fell about an

hour before dawn. When I stood out there and looked up at the sky, it was perfectly clear above me and all the way to the west; so I loaded up the cameras, made some coffee, jumped in the Tracker, and took off west, where the land rolls like a bunched up carpet and the landscape's yawning breadth is huge.

But the clouds that dropped the rain were a thick curtain, so when I stood out in an open field I honestly had nothing to shoot at. I got back in the truck and headed home, slowly, thinking maybe something worth shooting would appear, as it often does.

Some mornings, even out here, miles from open water, mists lounge in low spots like gossamer, like satin left behind. Fog makes the sun look as perfectly cut as a communion wafer rising like something offered mysteriously from the night.

On windy mornings when the skies are clear, the light of dawn can be overpowering. The moment it rises, the sun washes everything out as if it were midday. The only place to shoot is west, where shadows run long and deep.

The most beautiful dawns are not perfectly clear because what colors the sky like a palate is clouds. They break the intensity or create immense

crowns of brightness, shimmering rays leaping up to heaven. They take what the sun offers in innumerable different ways, a light show that's new every morning. Dawn is the most incredible show anyone will ever see, and it happens every day on an absolutely limitless theater screen just outside our door.

And what's most incredible about the show is that it's really God speaking—or so says the Psalmist here. "The heavens declare the glory of God," he says, which is to say that the sky itself is a preacher, whose sermons are never derivative nor stultifying. What the heavens say is big and glorious, ever-changing, and always new, even though the themes of those daily homilies never change.

What the dawn says is that God is God. When we acknowledge him to be the Supreme Architect, the creator of the very fabric of the universe, says Calvin, then we can't help but be ravished with wonder.

I've been a church-goer for most of my life, so much so that I feel guilty if I don't go. I wonder why I don't feel the same about dawn because when the heavens declare his glory, God himself, a noted clergyman, is on the pulpit. His sermon is the sky.