

HERE AND THERE (A SERMON ABOUT GOD)

Psalm 8; John 1:1-14

A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham

The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

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Marla and I were in Washington Square Park last weekend, and we weren't exactly the only ones. Half of Greenwich Village was there, I think. It was a beautiful day, and Washington Square is never dull, so we had some fun sitting for a while on a park bench, watching the people – especially the children. There was one child in particular who caught my eye, as he darted furtively from one tree to the next, back and forth, back and forth. Watching him triggered an old memory of a skit on "Sesame Street," which I have must have watched when our children were young. I went looking for it online when we got back to our apartment and found it on YouTube. In the skit, a young Muppet asked Grover and Herry for help understanding the concepts of "here" and "there." Herry said, "Well that's easy; you stay *here* with Grover, and I'll go over *there*." So Herry walked some distance away, whereupon the young Muppet said to Grover, "I want to be over *there*." Grover said, "Well, that's easy. Just walk over *there*." So, he walked over to Herry and said, "So now I am *there*, right?" But Herry said, "No, now you are *here*. Grover is there."

"But I didn't want to be *here*," the young Muppet replied. "I wanted to be *there*." And so Herry sent him back to Grover, who was now *there*. And the cycle was on, as the young Muppet scurried back and forth like the child in the park last weekend, trying to get *there*, only to arrive *here* again and again.¹ Now, hold that thought for a moment.

Today is Trinity Sunday in the church's calendar, the day when we in the church try to get our minds around one of the church's great and deep mysteries – this God we profess and proclaim to be One God known in three persons. It is the mystery contained in Jesus' commission to go and baptize all nations in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is the mystery hinted at in the great benedictory words of the apostle Paul: "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all." They are words we hear in one form or another every Sunday, but they only hint at the fullness of God and may leave us more than a little confused. Robert Farrar Capon once said that when human beings try to describe God, we are like a bunch of oysters trying to describe a ballerina.² We simply don't have the equipment to understand something so utterly beyond us, though that has never stopped us from trying. Even those who have devoted their lives to such understanding often recognize the limits of their reason and grasp. Henri Nouwen, the wonderful Dutch theologian and teacher, once said, "You can be an expert in many things, but you can't be an expert in God."³

¹ See it for yourself *here*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9m-kbBamg_U

² As cited by Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way*, Cambridge, Cowley Publications, 1999, 152-153.

³ Cf. note 2.

Absolutely true. We can only speak of God in terms of the human experience. Yet there are some things we can say. And one thing I believe is that that young Muppet's seemingly endless quest for "there" mirrors the Christian's quest for God. Our quest takes us on a journey between the God who is *there* – transcendent, beyond comprehension, the Lord of the Universe – and the God who is *here* – the Word made flesh, God with us. A hard-to-fathom mystery, to be sure, but both parts are essential to our Christian understanding of God.

The scientific exploration of the cosmos and the photographs from space telescopes these last decades have been a boon to the field of cosmology; they have also taught us much. At the same time, their discoveries have delivered us deeper and deeper into the mystery of existence. Former NASA astronaut Jack Louwsma used to preface his lectures on space exploration with a portrait of the utter vastness of the space we seek to explore. He reminded people that our solar system is but a tiny part of one galaxy, an immense cluster of millions of stars we call the Milky Way. That galaxy alone is so large that if we were able to travel at the speed of light (186,300 miles per second), it would still take us 100,000 years just to get from one end of the Milky Way to the other. And our galaxy is not the only galaxy. In fact, if you want a really staggering figure, scientists now estimate that the number of galaxies like ours equals some 100 billion, maybe twice that number – that's at least 14 galaxies for each of the earth's 7-plus billion human beings.⁴

I find it even more amazing to think about what such ruminations have to say about God. Given the immensity of the universe and the relative insignificance of this small planet, how are we to interpret the Mystery we affirm at Christmas, the Mystery of God's incarnation in human form? The Christian faith steadfastly affirms two truths about God in proclaiming that Mystery, two truths that are seemingly in tension with one another. Our theology ascribes words to these two divine attributes. The first is *transcendence*. "Transcendence" affirms that God is *there* – out there, vast beyond vastness. God lies outside all categories of human comprehension. God is beyond imagination.

But in tension with that truth we claim another truth about God as well. In many ways, the transcendence of God is the easier to imagine. The theological vocabulary word that names the other side of the Divine Reality is the word *immanence*.

Immanence affirms that the God of the vastness and the cosmic mystery is also God as near to us as our own breath. God is *here*. What is more, Christian faith brings this immanence of God to the most radically personal level conceivable; for Christians the immanence of God actually comes to have a name. Christians proclaim that the immanence of God became known to us in the child Jesus born in a stable. The God of all space becomes immanent in very specific and particular places: Bethlehem, Nazareth, Galilee, Jerusalem. The God beyond time is born into concrete time ... into the messiness of a particular human history: when Quirinius was governor of Syria, during the reign of

⁴ As cited by Michael Lindvall in a paper presented to the January 1999 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and revised by numbers yielded by the Hubble telescope.

Caesar Augustus, in the days of Herod the King. In Jesus, the God of eternity breaks into the particularity of time and place and speaks a Word – speaks that Word personally - to you, to me, and to every person on earth.

Further, the God of the eons is also the God of the cross. Nowhere in the story of Jesus does the fusion of immanence and transcendence become more powerful than at the cross. The cross is that deeply ironic intersection where God's eternal and cosmic purpose encounters real life at its most down-to-earth reality. The very image of the invisible God hanging on a cross, of all places. The One through whom all things were made, nailed to a cross. The One who was before all things, consigned to a cross. The inescapable point is that the same transcendent God who hurled the planets into their places is the God who loves each of us with such a fierce love: so intimately as to suffer the cross for us.

The cross cries out that God is not simply passionless and disconnected vastness in the face of the earth's tragedies. Knowing *this one thing* – understanding in our gut that the God of light years and 14 galaxies apiece is the same God who loves us – transforms the whole texture of existence and gives us reason to hope, even in the midst of all the chaos around us. If our future is tied up in God's future, then we and those we love are forever in good hands.

Close to 50 years ago, a story appeared in the Minneapolis *Star and Tribune*, a story about a Catholic nun, Sister Helen Mroska, who had taught school in the western Minnesota community of Morris for many years. The story told of Sister Helen's remembrance of an especially difficult Friday in 1965 when her junior high students, frustrated by some difficult math problems, became cranky and edgy. So, she told them on a whim to put the problems aside and take out a clean sheet of paper and to make a list of their classmates' names. Then she told them to think of the kindest thing they could say about each of their classmates. She collected the lists at the end of the period and then took them home. Over the weekend, she wrote the name of each student in the class one-by-one on separate sheets of paper, and then listed for each one all the good things their classmates had written about them. On Monday she handed back to the students the compiled lists. There were smiles, but no one mentioned the lists again, not at least for several years.

Then, a half-dozen years later in the summer of 1971, Sister Helen learned that one of those students, Mark Eklund, had been killed in Vietnam. His parents called with the news and invited her to his funeral. And so she went, and afterward, visited with the family and a group of Mark's classmates, her old students, at the family home. "We want to show you something," Mark's father told her, and he brought out a wallet and took from it a piece of paper. "They found this on Mark when he was killed. We thought you might recognize it." The piece of paper had obviously been folded and refolded many times. The teacher knew without looking that the paper was the one on which she had written all the good things each of Mark's classmates had said about him. Mark's mother thanked Sister Helen for doing the exercise, "As you can see, Mark treasured it." Then some of Mark's classmates chimed in. "I still have my list," one said. "It's in the top

drawer of my desk at home.” “I have mine, too,” another said. “It’s in my diary.” Yet another pulled her list from her pocketbook, “I carry this with me at all times,” she said.⁵

Friends, there is perhaps nothing, simply nothing more important to know in this life than this one thing: that somehow your life matters, that you are significant. In all this sea of humanity – 7.7 billion of us - the hairs on your head are numbered. In the eternity of timelessness, your deepest yearnings and your deepest sorrows matter to God. The God of the vastness is the God who loves every fine part of you. And that one piece of knowledge - knowing that you are loved, that you are significant – can transform everything about life... and about death. Knowing that that worth comes from God is a knowledge of pure grace.

It might be nice to have a list from the ninth grade to remind you that you are significant. But you don’t need it. You already have something to do that. Just look straight ahead of you, right now, in this room. There... on the Table... the cross.

Hold to the cross. Carry it with you. Put it in the top drawer of your desk. Fold it into your journal. Carry it wherever you go. And if ever in this big city in this big world you feel insignificant - if ever you *imagine* that you are insignificant - just look at the cross and remember who and whose you are. There you will find a more lasting hope than any this world, with all its terrors and heartaches, can ever afford you. There. Here. Transcendence ... immanence... God.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
The moon and the stars that you have established;
What are human beings that You are mindful of them?
Mortals that you care for them?

In the beginning was the Word....
And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...

There.
Here.

⁵ <https://www.chickensoup.com/book-story/38913/all-the-good-things>, accessed June 3, 2019.