

“Magnificent Mystery”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
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Text: “And the word became flesh and dwelt among us filled with grace. And we have beheld his glory, as of the father” (John 1:14).

Several years ago I came across a book entitled *Rare Earth*, written by two prominent scientists, Dr. Peter Ward of the University of Washington and Dr. Donald C. Brownlee also of the University of Washington. These two astronomers made quite a stir in the scientific community by arguing the existence of life in advanced forms may be much more rare than previously imagined. Dr. Carl Sagen and others scientist argued for years that there were literally hundreds of thousands of advanced civilizations throughout our galaxy and the entire cosmos. Ward and Brownlee believe that life, as we know it, may be much more rare than previously thought.

For one thing, modern science is demonstrating that the earth’s composition and stability are extremely rare. Almost everywhere else in our galaxy radiation levels are too high, the right chemical elements are too scarce, and the number of killer asteroids and rocks too numerous. Ward and Brownlee point out that there is something very remarkable about our solar system. The earth is just the right distance from the sun to sustain life. If it were just a few thousand miles closer, it would be too hot on our planet to sustain life. If it were a few thousand miles

further from the sun, it would be too cold. Moreover, the scientists have discovered that the planet Jupiter plays a unique role in our solar system. Because of its enormous size, it absorbs many of the comets, asteroids, and other debris in space that could destroy our planet and forms a protective shield for us.

Now, of course, there is a vast almost limitless amount of the cosmos that we know nothing about. But we do know one thing. There is no other comparable form of life in our own solar system and that in itself is quite remarkable.

There is much we know about the origin of our world that was unknown just a few years ago. Today, scientists speak of “a big bang,” of “black holes,” of “quasars” and “quarks.” It is hard not to stand before all of this without some deep sense of mystery.

I.

Theologians, throughout the years, have distinguished between problems, puzzles, and mysteries. Problems, by their nature, can be solved, given the right application of human resources--science, technology, logical analysis. Some problems such as cancer or social problems may be so complex that they never will be resolved. But theoretically, given the right research, funding and purpose problems can be solved.

Life can also be understood as a puzzle. A puzzle at first glance may appear to be a mystery. Yet, once the pieces are identified and placed together, a puzzle can be solved, no matter how difficult it may appear to be.

Mystery is something essentially different from a problem or a puzzle. A mystery cannot be solved either in principle or practice. That is its fundamental nature. Moreover, mystery is also unique in that it encompasses us. Mystery also eludes us. It is found in the contemplation of the world around us. It is found in the question, “Why is there something and not nothing?” It is present in the child’s question, “Who made God?” The proper response to problems is study, hard work, and the application of the proper techniques and procedures. The proper response to a mystery is silence, wonder, awe, and prayer.

II.

The scriptures from beginning to end have to do with the mystery that encompasses our existence. The Book of Genesis opens with the simple affirmation, “In the beginning God made the heavens and the earth.” The writer of the Gospel of John begins with this affirmation: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.” Here is the self-disclosure of the Creator in whose will and purpose the universe came to be.

To affirm that the Word has become flesh is to affirm that the universe has its origin in the will, the intention, and the purpose of God. Or to put it another way, our lives are not accidents. We are here because God has placed us here. Hubert Butterfield, a distinguished

historian, once made the following observation: “For let us be sure of one thing--in the long run there are only two alternative views about life or about history. Here is a fact that was realized thousands of years ago and it is still as true as ever. Either you trace everything back to sheer blind chance, or you trace everything to God.”

This month’s *Harper’s Magazine* contains an article by Erik Reece, entitled “Jesus Without Miracles,” in which the author, drawing on the works of Thomas Jefferson and the Gospel of Thomas presents a Jesus that never performs miracles and never claims that he will have to die for the sins of humankind. I have learned over the years that many such articles often tell us much more about the author than the subject. In this case the author is the son of a Baptist minister who committed suicide. Along the way the author lost his faith and now has discovered a Jesus who is as remote from the New Testament as one could imagine.

On Christmas Day we affirm that in Jesus Christ the Word has become flesh. Because we affirm this, we believe that the world around us is an expression of purpose, intentionality, and ultimately the love of God. That is what we celebrate this day.

III.

Then, too, on this Christmas morning as we proclaim that the Word was made flesh, we affirm as well that all of creation has its meaning in Jesus Christ. “All things were made through him,” the Gospel of John affirms, “and without him was not made anything that was made.” The God who created the world is the same God we know in Jesus Christ. That means that the world is good, not evil. One of the most powerful ideas in the history of religion is the notion that the world that God has created is evil.

At the end of the 1990s a scholar by the name of Francis Fukuyama wrote a book he entitled *The End of History*, in which he argued that as the twentieth century was coming to an end, Western liberal democracy had won the great battles of the last hundred years. In the 20th Century both the fascism of Hitler’s Germany and the totalitarianism of Soviet communism had been defeated. Fukuyama argued that with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989 America now stood as the only remaining superpower, thus insuring peace and prosperity for the whole world.

That vision now lies in the wreckage of the events of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent months and years that have followed. Today we are engaged in a War of Terrorism against the forces with a radical view of Islam. This week the President of Iran announced that the holocaust was a myth conjured up by Europeans and that the nation of Israel should be destroyed. He also issued an order forbidding young people in Iran from listening to the music of the West. Now, I can only assume that the President of Iran is not a parent of a teenager, because if he were, he would undoubtedly know that the best way to get young people to do something is to forbid them to do it.

Now, there are many aspects of Western culture with which one could argue, but one of the most important aspects of the Christian faith is its insistence that the world that God has

created is good. That is why we celebrate the incarnation. The Word made flesh affirms that the world God has made is good.

IV.

The Word made flesh means also that the power that calls that which was not into being and which raises the dead also reconciles and heals. The Creator is the Redeemer. This is the climax of the birth of Christ as told by the Gospel of John: “To all who received him ...he gave power to become children of God” (John 1:12).

There is nothing more important today than for the church to recover the centrality of Jesus Christ. Over and over again the New Testament affirms that at the heart of our faith is not a doctrine but a person. One of the most powerful witnesses to the centrality of Jesus Christ is found in the Letter to the Hebrews. The author of this book had seen the persecution of the church that was taking place at the hands of the Roman Empire. Amidst this persecution he affirmed that Christ himself is Christianity. Ask him what is the persistent, eternal factor in Christianity and he offers no abstract theology. He knows that theology can change. Rather, he says, “Jesus Christ...the same yesterday, today, and forever.” Ask him what it means ethically to live a Christian life and he gives no abstract code of moral laws. He knows that moral customs change. Rather, he says, “Consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, even Jesus; who was faithful to him who appointed him.” Ask him where he finds the strength and power to carry on when the road is tough and his answer is, “Consider the one who endured the criticism of sinners against himself that you do not grow weary, fainting in your soul.” Say to him that the world is going to the dogs that mankind is stupid, brutal, and uncivilized, and incorrigible and he says, “True enough! We do not yet see all things controlled by man; what we do see is Jesus.”

George Kenan, who for a number of years was the American Ambassador to the Soviet-Union, once remarked that he did not believe that Marxism would every succeed in part because it could not give an answer to the problem of death. Kenan said there was nothing more depressing than attending a Marxist funeral. There was no hope for the individual beyond death.

The same is true of the radical view of Islam that is held be terrorist today. You cannot build a civilization on the basis of “suicide bombers.”

That is why it is important for us to celebrate Christmas, for in the birth of Christ we believe that the Word has been made flesh. It is the birth of Christ that gives our lives meaning and redeems us from the powers of sin and death.

“Joy to the world, the Lord has come.
Let earth receive her king.”

Amen!

