

“Magnificent Mystery”

a sermon by

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Texts: “And the word became flesh and dwelt among us full of truth and glory. And we held the glory of the only begotten Son of God.” (John 1:14)

Several years ago I came across a remarkable book entitled *Rare Earth*, which was written by two scientists Peter Ward and Donald Brownlee. In this book these two scientists challenge a widely held theory that the universe is filled with a large number of civilizations, many of which may be far more complex than ours. The scientist Carl Sagan once posited that there were probably millions of civilizations within our own galaxy, the Milky Way.

But Ward and Brownlee argue that human life may be rarer than many scientists have imagined. They point, for example, to the distance of the planet earth from the sun. If the earth were closer to the sun, the heat would be so intense that life would not be possible. In the same manner if the earth were further from the sun, it would be so cold that again the emergence of life would not be possible.

Ward and Brownlee also point to another remarkable aspect of our solar system. The planet Jupiter is an extremely large planet. In many ways it is a giant “asteroid” trap. Its size allows it to absorb many of the asteroids that might have destroyed our planet many years ago.

The authors conclude that while we do not know if there is life in our galaxy, we do know one thing. There is no evidence of life in the solar system in which we live. Of course, we have not explored a fraction of our galaxy. But one thing seems almost certain. Life may be much rarer than some have imagined. Instead of there being many civilizations in our galaxy, there might be just a few. In fact, there might be only one.

I.

Human life, as we know it is encompassed in mystery. It does not explain itself, and knowing how it works does not make clear why it should work at all. For all of our modern knowledge, human life remains puzzlement.

The Christian witness in the Advent and Christmas season is that the mystery has made itself known. God has revealed himself in his Son Jesus Christ, who is the Word made flesh.

There is no more succinct statement of the Christian belief in the incarnation than one finds in the Gospel of John: “And the word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.”

II.

We know more about the world we live in today than has ever been known. There is general agreement in the scientific community that our universe came into existence 20 billion years ago with a terrific explosion beyond our comprehension.

Our own earth came into existence 4.5 billion years ago and there is evidence of upright walkers and toolmakers 3.5 million years ago. There is much we know about the beginnings of our universe, but there is much we do not know and probably will never know about the emergence of human life.

Theologians have for sometime distinguished between problems, puzzles, and mystery. Problems are due to ignorance or ineptness. The nature of a problem is that given the correct amount of resources, time, and energy, problems are solvable.

The same is true with puzzles. At first glance a puzzle may have the appearance of a mystery. Now puzzles can be frustrating. Sometimes the clue seems to elude us. But puzzles can be solved, given the right information and clues.

But mystery is essentially different from problems or puzzles. A mystery is not solvable in principle or in practice. It is never within our grasp. The proper response to a problem is study, hard work, and the application of known techniques. The proper response to mystery, however is wonder, awe, and prayer.

The Scriptures, from beginning to end, have to do with the mystery that encompasses our existence. The Book of Genesis opens with the statement, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” The writer of the Fourth Gospel echoes that when he writes, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

Here is the self-disclosure of the Creator in whose will and purpose the universe came to be.

As we begin this season of Advent, we begin a journey that leads us to the birth of Christ. Easter and Christmas are the two central festivals of the Christian faith. They affirm the incarnation of God and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

So what is it that we are affirming about human life when we declare the Word made flesh?

III.

The Word become flesh, means, first of all, that the universe, as well as our own particular existence is the will, the intention and the purpose of God.

The ultimate option in the matter of faith is the choice between the faith that the universe is the expression of impersonal powers and forces with no provision of their end, and on the other hand, the faith that the universe is the expression of purpose, intentionality, and love. This purpose and love are revealed through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Several weeks ago I mentioned watching the movie “Frost/Nixon,” which chronicled the famous interview in 1977 between David Frost, a British talk show host, and President Richard Nixon. At one point in the interview David Frost asked the former President what it was like to resign suddenly from the office of the President to a self-imposed exile in San Clemente, California.

Nixon said that the most difficult thing in his life was the loss of meaning and purpose. For him, he said, life could not be understood apart from some purpose. For him, his life was rooted in public service. Suddenly, that was taken from him and the President acknowledged the great loneliness and despair that had engulfed him.

The incarnation of the Word made flesh is an affirmation that our lives are not meaningless, but that each life is rooted in the purpose of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

IV.

The Word made flesh also means that all creation has its meaning in Jesus Christ. “All things were made through him,” writes the Gospel of John, “and without him was not made anything that was made.” (John 1:3)

The God who created the world is the God whom we know in Jesus Christ. In the Judaic Christian tradition this means that the world is good, not evil. To say that the world is good is to say that it is consistent with love and that it has an intelligible and rational structure.

The Protestant Reformers in Geneva and the Puritans of England did not celebrate Christmas, in part because they understood how easy it is to turn this celebration into a festival of nature.

The excesses of Christmas are known to all of us. And yet, there is something fundamentally right about Christmas – the gathering of family and loved ones, the exchange of presents, the colors and festivities of Christmas – these all affirm that the world God has created is good.

V.

Yet, there is a further point which has to be made over against the way we celebrate Christmas today. If the joy of creation is the only joy that we know, we shall not long experience

that. For the joys of this world soon come to an end unless there is a deeper joy. No mere human joy can sustain itself against the inevitable frustration, failure and disappointments of life, to say nothing of the final fact of death. There is in the end no joy unless there is something more than the joy of created existence. The joy of Christmas must be undergirded by the profounder joy of the crucifixion and Easter. The joy of created existence depends on this greater joy.

The Christmas message is that a Word has been spoken out of the mystery which encompasses us, that God in his self expression became flesh and dwelt among us.

There are those who say it is not true, but there are none who can say that it is trivial. And if it is true, it is the greatest news that has come to human beings on this planet.

Thanks be to God! Amen!