

Sermon.02.19.23.Epiphany7A.Science.Religion

St. Paul's Episcopal – Brookings

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Exodus 24.12-18; Psalm 99; 2 Peter 1.16-21; Matthew 17.1-9

Mystery, Awe and Wonder in Religion and Science

Today is the last Sunday of Epiphany; it is also the Sunday we have selected to acknowledge the connections between religion and science. The theme for this year's observance of connections between religion and science is "Mystery, Awe and Wonder in Religion and Science." Our readings, which include an account of Jesus' Transfiguration, convey a sense of mystery, awe, and wonder.

In our reading from Exodus, God commands Moses to come up Mt. Sinai and to wait for the tablets of stone which contain God's commandments. After Moses ascended the mountain, a cloud "covered the mountain" and "the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai" – the appearance of which was "like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel" (Exodus 24.16-17; NRSVUE). Imagine the sense of mystery, awe, and wonder which Moses and the people of Israel experienced.

In Psalm 99 the psalmist begins by acknowledging the Lord is King and the greatness of the Lord. Recognizing the law, the psalmist prays, "O mighty king, lover of justice, you have established equity; you have executed justice and

righteousness in Jacob.” Thus, we are to “Proclaim the greatness of the Lord our God and fall down before God’s footstool” (Psalm 99.4-5; NRSVUE).

Matthew 16 ends with Jesus telling his disciples that some present would not die until they had seen the coming of the kingdom. Chapter 17 begins by noting it is now six days later. Jesus invited Peter, James, and John to accompany him up a high mountain where he was transfigured such that “his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became bright as light” (Vs. 2; NRSVUE). Moses and Elijah appeared and were talking with Jesus. After suggesting they set up a booth or a tent for each of them, a “bright cloud overshadowed them and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!’” (Vss. 4-5). The disciples, overcome with fear, fell to the ground. After this event, Jesus told them to tell no one until after he was raised from the dead.

In our reading from 2 Peter, Peter, speaking to fellow Christians, tells them he is not speaking from clever myths but from a direct, eye-witness encounter with God. Peter then recounted his experience at Jesus’ Transfiguration when he, along with James and John, heard God’s voice say, “This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (Vss. 16-17).

How do we encounter God? When do we experience mystery, awe, and wonder? Let’s not forget the words of the Eucharist: “Therefore we proclaim the

mystery of faith: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.” After offering our gifts, and the bread and wine, we pray, “Sanctify them by your Holy Spirit to be for your people the Body and Blood of your Son, the holy food and drink of new and unending life in him” (BCP, p. 363). Due to repetition, we may lose sight of the significance of these words; they should serve to fill us with a sense of mystery, awe, and wonder.

Many of us often encounter God in nature – in the pulsing of the ocean, or in majestic mountains and forests where we sense the works of God and are humbled. I vividly recall one such experience which took place 50 years ago while stationed in Alaska. Another officer and I decided to hike approximately 10 miles to a cairn located on Cairn Mountain. As our radar site was on top of one of the foothills west of the Alaskan range, we had very little experience with the arctic tundra. With each step you we sank several inches. We were approximately three miles from our site when it was time to roll out the sleeping bags. It was a bright moonlit night. As I was dropping off to sleep, my companion exclaimed, “Shoot that ****!” When I looked up, a huge snowy owl was hovering about five feet above our heads. I said, “No, he’s just curious!” When I would wave my arm, he would move a couple of feet higher. He showed no fear whatsoever. We were likely the first humans it had encountered. I spent the next half hour watching this

majestic bird and its mate winging their way through surrounding valleys. The only visible light was the radar station, and the sky was filled with the Milky Way. I remember experiencing a profound sense of humility – a sense of my own insignificance. Mystery, awe, and wonder were present.

Ideally, extensive learning should also promote a sense of mystery, awe, and wonder. If not, one has not yet learned enough, for the more we learn, the more we should come to realize how much we do not know. As John C. Mather, winner of the 2006 Nobel Prize in physics, observes: "We are discovering what the universe is really like, and it is totally magnificent, and one can only be inspired and awestruck by what we find. I think my proper response is complete amazement and awe at the universe that we are in, and how it works is just far more complicated than humans will ever properly understand"

<https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/small-c-catholic/religion-and-science-share-same-roots-awe-and-wonder>).

Prior to 1923 (100 years ago) astronomers believed the Milky Way was the extent of the universe; nebulae were believed to be nearby clouds of dust and gas. In October 1923, Edwin Hubble was using the Hooker telescope (at 100 inches, the largest telescope of the time) when he spotted "a Nova star flaring up dramatically in the Andromeda 'nebula'." Further examination revealed it to be a

Cepheid, a variable star, which could be used to measure distance. Andromeda proved to be at least a million light years away, far beyond our galaxy, and “a galaxy in its own right containing billions of stars”

(https://www.esa.int/About_Us/ESA_history/Edwin_Hubble_The_man_who_discovered_the_Cosmos). Hubble discovered the cosmos and the fact that our universe is expanding. The first telescope in space was named the Hubble for good reason.

The Hubble telescope resulted in awesome discoveries, e.g., the existence of 100 - 200 billion galaxies each containing billions of stars, but these discoveries pale in light of those from the Webb telescope. The first images from the Webb telescope were released to the public on July 12, 2022. This telescope has enabled us to capture light from stars that are billions of light years away. We now realize there are billions of galaxies each containing billions of stars. We are confronted by a sense of mystery, awe, and wonder!

I am also struck by the mystery, awe, and wonder which accompany the study of genomics and gene therapy. This week I read of a potential breakthrough in the treatment of glioblastoma, a “treatment developed at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston ... Using gene engineering, they took living human cancer cells and redesigned them to release a cancer-cell killing agent, and they

made it easier for the immune system to spot cancerous cells and KO them.”

These altered “cells are like homing pigeons and flock to their fellow cancer cells wherever they are lurking. Once there, these weaponized versions kill those cancer cells – without damage to other tissue” (Dr. Roizen, *A new vaccine appears to treat deadly brain cancer*, Brookings Register, February 14, 2023). The new treatment still must go through the clinical trial and approval stages.

Such scientific discoveries are taking place in many fields. Of course, there are those who proclaim we do not need to postulate the existence of God to account for these things, but I like this quotation from Dr. Maya Ackerman, an artificial intelligence researcher:

Research substantially impacts my worldview. Paradoxically, it brings both more rigor and more wonder and creativity into my understanding of the universe. **You can tell you are approaching the truth when order and beauty emerge.** More specifically, doing research in generative AI has been a wonderful journey. Generative AI enables an aggregation of human creativity, elevating that creativity to previously unimaginable heights. My research and industry work in generative AI has foundationally transformed my worldview, allowing me to experience firsthand the critical role that researchers have in creating our societies, as well as the need to focus on socially responsible and ethical developments for powerful innovations. In a very real way, science creates science fiction. Combining scientific rigor with great imagination has led to the greatest transformations in humanity, and we are only just beginning. [Bold print my emphasis.]

<https://bigthink.com/thinking/how-science-changes-way-we-think/>

I especially like the phrase, “You can tell you are approaching the truth when order and beauty emerge.” I believe God is the source of all order and beauty.

As King David wrote, “The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” (Psalm 19.1). In Psalm 8, David proclaimed, “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are humans that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet” (Vs. 3-6).

Over the years, my studies have convinced me that all of creation is governed by physical and moral laws. This is not meant to be dismissive of minor cultural variations. We are created and gifted in the image of God such that we can live in accordance with these laws – whether revealed by Moses and Jesus, or discovered through natural revelation and science.

Some – those who choose to worship self – choose to live out of arrogance and pride; they choose to exploit most everything and everyone for their own purposes. For the most part, they are unable to experience the mystery, awe, and wonder of creation. Not so for those who choose to live into the image of God!

Mystery, awe, and wonder are treasured assets of their lives; their sense of humility testifies to this fact.

Amen