

WATCHING AND WAITING  
A LIGHT IN THE NIGHT

Texts on New Year's Eve 2013

*Genesis 15: 1-6; Philippians 2: 5-11*

In our story from Genesis, Abram, whose name means “exalted father,” was father to no one, though he was very old. This story catches him in a crisis, feeling faceless before time. In this moment, with nothing to show, there comes the question, *What has my life been for? Why did I live it? What sign of it when I am gone will there be? How will it show that I yearned for heaven, or love? How say, that boundless desire burned in me sometimes—not to conquer, but to embrace and to yield? How, handle the sands falling through my hands?* Even to those blessed with many children, there can come a moment like this—the crisis of genesis: Will it matter?

Here we are once more at the cusp of the new year. Why do we mark its passing so sharply? Does it matter? From the surface of the Sun, if one could look to the heavens tonight and see Planet Earth fly by in the sky, our new year would sure not show. From there, they'd wonder *Why such a fuss?*—for from there, every turn of the little twirling Earth looks like another as it moves through its round. Why is this night different from all others? Now, Saturn from the Sun's side might seem special—only three orbits in a whole human life! But why do we so clearly mark our passage through this arbitrary point in space which none but we can see? It's simple, isn't it? Because we want to see this precious thing of life we cannot catch or keep . . . from a distance. So we stop for a moment. Could you be found anywhere more fitting and warm than a cathedral from which to watch and wonder how it all will matter?



I like reading scientists like Brian Greene and Paul Davies who explore, for limited minds like mine, “the infinitely small and the infinitely great” worlds of quanta and pulsars and exploding supernovas. I can't begin to explain the experiments they've done these last hundred years to reveal the nature of the universe we inhabit, but I bring a short report of my own often awe-struck experience while reading: The universe is very, very, very weird.

“The world is crazy,” says one scientist, speaking not of the behavior of humans, but of photons of light and of gravity and time. “‘Time’ is in trouble,” asserts physicist John Wheeler, who joins a chorus of quantum colleagues in singing what only mystics sang before Einstein, that “the distinction between past, present, and future is only an illusion.” Those are Einstein's words! You probably know that light is literally bent by the gravity of big bodies in space. Whatever time is gets warped as gravity bends light.

Because of these effects of gravity on light, two identical atomic clocks, one on top of the Empire State Building and the other down on 5<sup>th</sup> Ave., measure time at slightly different speeds. They've *done* this. Time has no time to move the way we think it moves. Writes Davies, "Quantum cosmology has abolished time as surely as [does] the mystic's altered state of consciousness."

If all this sounds bewildering, then we're done; new knowledge was not the point—rather, a flavor here on New Year's Eve for how utterly unconnected from common sense and cause and effect the universe really is; how heedless it is of our annual orbit about our sun or this little festival tonight; and of our ways of reckoning what is so. A little astronomy and physics can humble you on a night like this. Before the sciences peered in and out through their magnificent glasses, everyone assumed humans were the center of everything. Each tribe and culture believed all truth was to be seen only through its stories and beliefs, and cared nothing for others' errors. But good glasses forced us off our thrones. Like children growing up, we began to see that neither we ourselves nor our people stood at the center of reality, nor our earth, nor our solar system nor our galaxy—perhaps not even our universe.

And as the watchmen of science looked in and out since Einstein's first discoveries, other kinds of deep knowing began to peel the scales from the eyes of certainty and power. A world of color began to replace a world of blinding white. Men began to see women not as "ours" but all of us as us, equal, and more than equal, for have not we [men] begun to see the feminine in our shadow, and you women the masculine in yours? The voice of "the love that could not speak its name" began to resound at last in courts and legislatures and finally even in churches, as we saw, like scientists, that there is not just one place to look from, or one time. Even our mute mother earth, having suffered centuries from our insatiable self-centeredness, now makes her song heard in calving glaciers and terrible tempests. Many are listening. What comes next? Will greed and war-makers see and stop the black hole they've sunk in history before it swallows us all?



Here's the thing. The motive force in real science and the motive force in justice and the motive force in love arise all from one source—from God, we say—out of honor and awe, though we know that God is not as once we thought him. Nor is our universe as we thought it. Neither are we what we thought ourselves to be. By science, justice, and love, true God draws us ever further up and into Godself, away from our self-at-center, away from fears. How this movement matches the hymn of the Master's relinquishment told in the epistle of the apostle Paul! You recall: That Christ Jesus did not regard equality with God as something to make use of—did not see himself

at the center—but emptied himself, was born in human flesh, took the form of a slave, and humbled himself in obedience, even to the point of death.

Did his life matter? Do you think he felt the crisis of genesis; wondered what his life had been for; why he lived it; what would be the sign of it when he was gone; what “children” his love would leave? Yet like Abram beneath the stars, Jesus trusted the word of the Lord, that his life was not a meaningless mote passing through space. Like Abram, he gave himself over to an unknown future he could not see. He did not fear. He trusted there would come through him generations in the Spirit numbered more than stars in the sky.

These stories are for you as you swing on this beautiful spaceship one more turn around the sun. They are here, waiting, as the upper reaches of the vault of this great cathedral are waiting, as the vault of the heavens above it are waiting, to assure you that those who see what is really so see that we stand at the center of nothing. And yet we are standing, not crushed, so that we might look up and see. We are given the heart to feel and the eyes to witness to the wonder absolute, set beneath a heavenful of stars beyond counting. Will it matter? You have been told why you can say Yes, even though you are standing on nothing that can be seen. And the Lord reckons it to you as righteousness.

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*The Riverside Church  
in the City of New York*