

"THIS IS THE DAY THAT THE LORD HATH MADE"
QUANTUM, CREATION & CHRIST

Texts: Genesis 1: 1-3 and John 1: 1-5

Sunday, July 20, 2008

Our texts for today begin "in the beginning."

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void. Darkness was over the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, "Be light," and light was. God saw that the light was good, and separated the light from the darkness.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness comprehend it not.

The theme is time, the beginning of time, the first of days, the day the Lord made. The poetry shimmers across two thousand years. Writing in an elegant style worthy of his world's wise men, the evangelist intended to enter into the philosophical debates of his day with a serious claim about the nature of reality, its beginning, its end, and its purpose. Yet from the point of view of the physical sciences, can we take John seriously? What can he have known about true beginnings? As God did Job, so might we press John: "Where were you when the foundations of the world were laid?" Question: How do you sort out the values and assertions of the scriptures when they appear not to connect with scientific study?

I like reading scientists who condescend to explain for limited lay minds like mine what researchers are finding in their explorations of "the infinitely small and the infinitely great" (Pascal's phrase) worlds of quantum states and pulsars and exploding supernovæ. Not to worry, I won't try to explain the wondrous experiments that Greene and Davies and others unpack for their readers. But I bring you this report from my often awe-struck experiences in reading their works. The universe—creation—is very, very, very strange. "The world is crazy," says one scientist and he is not talking about human behavior, but about the behavior of photons of light and gravity and time. "'Time' is in trouble," asserts physicist John Wheeler, who joins quantum's chorus of colleagues singing what only mystics sang before Einstein, that "the distinction between past, present, and future is only an illusion." Those are Einstein's words. His theories of relativity led to what Paul Davies calls "one of the most important discoveries in the history of human thought: time [itself], and all physical reality, must have had a definite origin in the past." (p.17) In the beginning? What beginning, if there was no time? Yet Augustine, the great fifth century theologian, already understood: "The world was made, not in time, but simultaneously with time." (De Civitatis Dei)

You have probably learned that light itself, fast but fixed in speed, is literally bent by big bodies in the heavens. Whatever time is is warped when light is bent, so that there is no universal clock ticking time for everywhere anywhere. Two identical atomic clocks, one on the top of the Empire State Building and one on the street, actually clock time moving at slightly different speeds, because of the effects of gravity on light. Writes Davies, "Quantum cosmology has abolished time as surely as [does] the mystic's altered state of consciousness. For a typical quantum state, time is meaningless . . ." ¿And this is the day the Lord hath made . . . in the beginning, when the light shined in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it?

Obviously, you can live a good life knowing nothing of the bizarre material creation that sustains you. Each time a baby watches her ball roll where she wants or where she does not, she is doing the research that really matters, learning Newton's physics—"For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." This is serviceable science, right? Its laws guide us well enough through thinged reality. And

are not moral laws far more important to us anyway? Why attend to the weird wee world of quanta or the beginning's big bang? What seems so to the senses serves well enough, does it not?

People often cluck that the religious are always last to accept science's ways of seeing. It's easy to find evidence for this notion, but it hardly fits all the facts; the roll of scientists is very long whose faith was expressed in their quest to know what is really so. May the Spirit of God invoke the same from us. Consider this. As the telescopes and microscopes of the sciences were perfected through the centuries, the sense for the centeredness of humanity also shifted. Before these great lenses existed, each tribe or culture or continent saw all truth filtered through its own myths and philosophies. Earth was assumed to be the center of the universe. But good glasses forced us from the high seat at the table. Now we see that the center is not our land, not our earth, not our solar system, not our galaxy, perhaps not even our universe. Why, we see that most of we seem to see is not simply so, but rather a convention, an agreement among ourselves. We stand at the center of nothing. And yet we are still standing. We who are bold to feel no immovable foundation beneath our being, we are not crushed. Is this not faith. Not just "sort of" but faith absolute—trust deeper than the depths of sea or space?

Now see this, too. While scientists have been looking out and looking in through these hundred years since Einstein's first discovery, have not we who are white, many at least, also begun to see ourselves as we really are, masters of nothing and of no one, welcomed by a world of color when the scales fall from our eyes? Have not we who are men begun to see women not as *our* women but as equal—and more than equal: essential to all seeing? Have we not begun to see the feminine in our shadow, and have not women begun to see the masculine in theirs? The voice of "the love that could not speak its name" has begun to resound at last in courts and legislatures and even in churches, as we see, like scientists, that there is not just one way of creation, or one time. Why, our mute mother earth, suffering centuries of our insatiable self-interest, now makes herself heard. Thousands, even millions, are listening. What is next? Will the wealthy truly see the poor?

The point here is simple, but deep in a way you can't quite get beneath to fully, finally understand. The force of science and the force of justice and the force of love arise as if from one source, all pushing in a like direction: always away from holding our self at center, moving us further up and further in, to see more, to let reality be. It is not what we thought. We are not what we thought. God is not what we thought. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, says the LORD, neither are your ways my ways. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:8-9)

So what then of John, who sets Christ at the center of all things? What of that Word in the beginning, the Word that was with God, the Word that was God? In my experience of living faith—I say this not to persuade you, but as a witness in Christ—the god of plans and small personal purposes is false, no god at all. The imponderable eons, the vastness of spaces, the violent cauldron of stars unseen, the incomprehensible singularity of the big bang, the all-consuming black holes and the endless silence all lean very, very hard against the edifice of a serviceable religion, a sort of Newtonian religion, where divine cause is echoed by human effects, much as a parent's plans for the child's day mostly come to pass. I doubt that is God's way. I think God has not laid out a template in time of provident will for just us. I think that is not God's business. The system is open, not closed, not predestined. Many of you think the same, I'd guess.

Can faith survive in such a strange space/time? Oh, more than survive. Faith can die to its old self and its fear of time and chance and rise to life- without-end as faith absolute, faith like Jesus' faith. For no matter how thoroughly science squeezes old assumptions from our old wineskins; no matter how our imagination of a fond father in heaven founders in the quantum sea, still we see. We see, we choose,

we risk, we act. Sure, we often act according to old habits, some evil, some serviceable. But not always. This extraordinary power, the freedom to make a thing new, has landed in us. It is genuinely ours—a gift absolute. Emerson put it this way. “Man is a stream whose source is hidden. Our being is descending into us from we know not whence.” If God is not the Newtonian watchmaker or the personal puppeteer pulling your strings, keeping you from harm on the highway (or getting you into it just in the nick of time); and yet if God is; then our old ideas of God must break, and our hope of God at work in all things must move further up and further in: God as the very upward movement of all knowledge, all science, all love, all justice, also landing here, in us, incarnate, we know not how. Yet ours to risk to choose to see all things so, and on this to act and grow. To let the old self go, past and gone, and become a new creation.

As for John’s inspired word, I believe not that God planned Jesus from before the ages began, but that in the awakening of God within humanity, there came in the time of Jesus the power to see in Jesus the incarnation of the Word by which God is eternally speaking: *Render, render, self-surrender. Hold not to life as you knew it, but see and see anew, give and forgive, and life will be given to you without end. By your death comes your new creation.* All things come into being through this Word, and apart from this Word, not one thing comes into being. It is in the beginning. In the confidence, affirmed by witness in Christ, that your errors, whether of mind or morals, will be seen but not set ever against you, you too are now in the beginning with the Word, ready to see anew, and choose, and act for creation. In the words of the late poet John O’Donohue

That you would gather yourself
And decide carefully
How you can now live
The life you would love
To look back on
From your deathbed.

This is the day the Lord has made!

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps
Buffalo, New York

delivered at The Presbyterian Church in Rensselaerville, New York