

Sermon Title: Beyond the Possible
Text: Isaiah 6:1-8; John 3:1-17
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Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI
Worship in the Park

It's been a week in which I've spent some time at hospital bedsides, with folk recovering from various surgeries that remind me of how thankful I am to have been born into not just an age, but a place in which the paradigms of science have allowed us to harness nature in ways that are truly mind-boggling, especially for someone whose last classroom experience in the sciences is something like 27 years behind me, and a speck at best in the rearview mirror. I truly cannot imagine what it might have meant to live in a time before sterilization, and anesthetics; of ultra sounds, and pasteurizing, and electricity and the internal combustion engine. Even as I am aware of the perilous dangers that spring like traps when we move further and further down the road of scientific discovery, I enjoy the benefits of technologies that, even if they were explained to me, I would not understand.

But there *is* a down side to it all, and I think of *that* every time we gather for worship here, in God's good nature, and wonder what it must have been like to live in a world before every natural event was a riddle to be unwound by the careful processes of scientific method. What was it like to live in a time when predicting the weather meant looking up at the sky, not staring down at the earth through satellite and radar images? Or when Spring to Summer, Summer to Fall, were occasions for a dance, and not complex reactions of light, and heat, and cells?

This past week, I read a review of a book written by someone by the name of Daniel Dennett, entitled, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as Natural Phenomenon*.¹ The review was written by Freeman Dyson. I know nothing about the author or the book, but I was drawn to the review because Dyson was the winner of the 2000 Templeton Prize, which is awarded annually to someone who has creatively explored the regions between religion and science. That there is a need in the world for something like a Templeton Prize is a witness to that downside I just mentioned. The sheer force of scientific argument can sometimes become the hammer by which all intimations of mystery in the world are dissolved. It breeds a way of looking at the world in which the only purpose of wonder is to nudge the reasoning mind to incontrovertible fact. But some, like those who award the Templeton Prize, wonder if there is not something tragic in a world that thinks *only* scientifically—that has lost its *religious* imagination.

Dennett's book, at least as Dyson's review suggests, is just one such attempt to reduce that religious imagination to a simple series of causes and effects that can be parsed, and reduced to "mere" historical sequence—facts—which this past week one of my favorite theologians, Homer Simpson, reminded me are "so boring" because you can prove anything even *remotely* true by using *facts*.

Dennett is a philosopher, not a scientist, so his interest is more in the questions than in the data, and so the purpose of this book is, in Dyson's words, to "confront the philosophical questions arising from religion in a modern world." And to Dennett's way of thinking, at least as Dyson summarizes it, the end point is that religious thinking is a quaint, and originally well intended

¹ Freeman Dyson, "Religion from the Outside", *The New York Review of Books*, 53:11 (June 22, 2006) available online at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/19090>.

way of making sense of the universe that is simply rendered archaic by the advance of the scientific method. If it is used today, it is most always, so Dennett thinks, either as a pawn for those seeking political power, or as a way of hanging on to what you might wish for in the face of insurmountable evidence.

Dyson is not shy in suggesting that he thinks there's another way. And it's that other way that's been on my mind this week, as I've lived with this most familiar story from the Gospel of John. Nicodemus came to Jesus long before scientific revolutions had put the earth in orbit around the sun. The night from which he came to Jesus was not the result of the earth's rotation on its axis, but the futility of the human condition, in which it is possible to grasp so much more than you can know. It was the darkness into which the light of God has shown, and John is careful to note at the beginning of his telling that the darkness will *not* overcome it!

Nicodemus was, so John tells us, a Pharisee, which is to say, one who had spent a good part of his life trying to fulfill what he'd been told since he was old enough to understand was God's Law for God's Chosen People. It was, I suppose, as close as that age came to a calculus, which allowed elegant equations by which the arc of a good life could be measured. But it's clear that Nicodemus is troubled by the world those equations managed to carve out. As he had heard Jesus' teaching, and witnessed his signs, he'd become convinced that there was something more he needed to know.

But it's significant, I think, that Jesus doesn't even allow this earnest seeker the first question. Before anything is asked, Jesus answers, and though it's lost to us because this is a story that I am afraid has been hijacked by those who look at Jesus' teaching as just one more equation to be solved, what Jesus really does is not so much answer, as *invite* this curious teacher of the law to put down his pencils and rulers and notebooks, and play.

It's a *word* play, really, and it is, I'm afraid, one of those jokes that gets lost in translation. It has to do with the fact that in Greek, adverbs are very slippery things, and can sometimes have very different meanings. Think of those wonderful children's books about the "king who rains" or the "princess with a frog in her throat." It probably wouldn't be helpful right now to explain the vocabulary that's involved. What's important is that Jesus really wanted Nicodemus to step outside his box—to play a little, and consider possibilities that just didn't fit into the equations that had been developed by centuries of parsing, and studying, and debating the law. And it's an indictment of centuries of Christianity that so many have taken Jesus' invitation and turned it right back into the sort of law Jesus was trying to goad Nicodemus *out* of: those well meaning, but frankly annoying folk who want to know if "you're born again" and who insist that if you're not, in their terms, which means that you've followed along in their four spiritual laws, and said the Jesus prayer just as it's printed in the end of the pamphlet, then you're simply *wrong*.

What Jesus wanted Nicodemus to *think* about was that the reign of God to which he pointed would not be found by crossing all the "I's" and dotting all the "t's", by getting back to a certain spot and then beginning all over again, like some intermediate piano student who keeps pounding back to the first measure until he can play the song "right" all the way through. What mattered to Jesus was whether or not you had glimpsed the *source*, and been caught in its flow:

if you'd been born, not *again* but *from above*—if the starting point of your journey was the place to which it led: the heart and hand of God!

Because at the end of the day, Jesus wanted Nicodemus to know (and I believe this with all my heart!) it's not the *how* that matters, but the “what” and the “why.” *That's* what that verse you memorized so many years ago is all about: God's plan for this world will not be fulfilled when Newton's laws are fully understood, or when we finally crack the secret that lies at the core of the atom, or at the distant fringe of the universe. It won't happen when at last every human being fulfills the jots and tittles of the law that came to Moses, or even—if I'm not mistaken, as Jesus said to the rich young man who came to Jesus in much the same way as Nicodemus—if we managed to fulfill just the two greatest commandments. Those are good and fruitful pursuits, and they are tools by which we truly can make this world a more humane, and comfortable place to live. But they will never be able to replace, or substitute for what God *desires* for this world: “For God so *loved* the world that he gave his only son, that whoever *believes* will not perish, but find the fullness of life!”

Understanding is a wonderful thing, and you've heard me say more than once that I really don't think God made us intelligent creatures so that we could park our brains at the door of the church every Sunday. But what will save us, at the end of the day, is not what we can possibly know. What will *save* us won't be that *we* have given our lives to Jesus and been born again. What *saves* is God's love, shown to us in the life, and death, and resurrection of his beloved.

The hard word of the Gospel this morning is that the modality of that love—the calculus that determines the arc of our salvation—is not one founded on any sort of knowledge, but is ours *only* in faith, as we *believe* that which, as Paul reminded the church in Corinth, “no eye has seen, nor any ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him.” Or as he wrote just a little later in that same letter, “if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.”

That, in the end, is what I think Mr. Dyson was trying to say to those who, with Mr. Dennett, can think of religion and science only as competing claims for the “true” way of making sense of our world. Enjoy the fruits of knowledge and intelligence, and all that modern science can bring, but always and only within the confidence of a life that is not just a monotonous cycle of repetition, being born again, and again, and again, but at its source and fulfillment, a gift of the Spirit that can be held only by believing hearts, that have learned, in the play of God's goodness, what it means to *love* because we are *beloved*.

Let us pray.