

## **2005-4-24 The Eternal Mystery Story MLB**

### **Opening Words**

We are here  
*as citizens of the universe,*  
to worship wholeheartedly,  
*to bring our redeeming sense of awe*  
into the difficult days of this modern age  
*as both a solace and encouragement.*

Thus, we begin our celebration with joy:

**Living our lives with purpose and gratitude,  
moved by the beauty of the world  
and claiming justice for all who live upon it,  
we open our hearts to greater loving,  
healthier knowledge, deeper compassion  
and hope of peace.**

### **Sequence**

How beautiful that, from timeless emptiness,  
from potential and possibility,  
the universe opened like a lotus flower.  
How beautiful that the stars whirled like dancers, and galaxies  
spread their arms like dervishes to a music no one could yet hear.  
How beautiful that stones born in the womb  
of space gathered themselves up in a ring around the newborn sun  
and solidified into the vast globe underneath the foundation of this  
building.

How beautiful that boiling seas yielded soft round life at last,  
which thickened into spines and fins and gaping mouths, which  
struggled to the land and gazed up at the steady stars without  
knowledge. How beautiful that scales stretched into feathers, and  
eggs became pouches became wombs, which opened onto time and

brought us forth with a shout. And how humbling the pages torn from the calendar of joy and doom: the crosses and chapel ceilings, the wars and hospices, the knowledge and uncertainty, the laughter and tears, the solitude and terror and hope. How surprising that we argue about mysteries, pose unanswerable questions, and pretend that we might one day be perfect, or even find a faithful measure of perfection. Oh Love most high and most deep, the edge of our reaching and the limit of our sinking, may this silence sign for us all that we know, really know, about what remains mysterious, and let it pose the best question of all....

### *Silence*

How beautiful that we who sit in this place are connected by our hearts to many who are not here, who live far away, or who have come to live in the shelter of our hearts. How beautiful that we might bring them too into this our time of worship by naming them softly into our shared sanctuary, or echo their name silently inside us. How beautiful that we are here together with our whole lives.

### *Naming*

How beautiful that music, so magical, so mysterious in its effect, can bring such solace, such healing, such wonder to so many. Praise for the beauty of this moment.

### **Readings**

**The First Reading** *comes from Leon Lederman, a Nobel Laureate who offered these words back in 1991 during a lecture. This section of his lecture he called Genesis.*

In the beginning there was a void – a curious form of vacuum, a nothingness, neither time nor space, neither stars nor planets – neither rocks nor trees, neither animals nor human beings. There were, however, in place, the laws of nature, or so we believe. And these laws dictated that the curious vacuum would explode, and in

this initial incandescence there were created space, time, and a hot plasma of primordial particles.

As the universe cooled and grew less dense, particles coagulated and forces differentiated. Pristine symmetry gave way to evolving complexity. Protons and neutrons formed, then nuclei and atoms and huge clouds of dust, which, still expanding, condensed locally here and there to form the galaxies and the stars and the planets.

On one planet – this one, a most ordinary planet, following precise mathematics, orbiting a mediocre star, one speck on the spiral arm of a standard galaxy – turbulent landmasses and more turbulent oceans organized themselves, and out of the oceans, an ooze of organic molecules reacted and built up the protein, and eventually life began. Plants and animals evolved out of simple organisms, and, in time, human beings arrived.

**The Second Reading** *is a 1997 poem by Pattiann Rogers and it's called Place and Proximity.*

I'm surrounded by stars. They cover me  
completely like an invisible silk veil  
full of sequins. They touch me, one by one,  
everywhere – hands, shoulders, lips,  
ankle hollows, thigh reclusions.

Particular in their presence, like rain,  
they come also in streams, in storms.  
Careening, they define more precisely  
than wind. They enter, cheekbone,  
breastbone, spine, skull moving out  
and in and out, through like threads,  
like weightless grains of beads  
in their orbits and rotations,  
their ritual passages.

They are the luminescence of blood  
and circuit the body. They are showers

of fire filling the dark, myriad spaces  
of porous bone. What can be nearer  
to flesh than light?

And I swallow stars. I eat stars.  
I breathe stars. I survive on stars.  
They sound precisely, humming in my nose,  
in my throat, on my tongue Stars, stars.

They are above me suspended, drifting,  
caught in the loom of the elm, similarly enmeshed  
in my hair. They are below me straight down  
in the deep. I am immersed in stars. I swim  
through stars, their swells and currents.  
I walk on stars. They are less,  
they are more, even than water,  
even than earth.

They come with immediacy. They are as bound  
to me as history. No knife, no death  
can part us.

### **Sermon: Creation The Eternal Mystery Story**

I remember the first time I had a mystical experience. Now don't  
get thrown off by that phrase. I'll define it for you in a minute. But  
first, let me tell you what happened.

I was a junior in high school. My high school was a long E-shaped  
building, a straightforward single-story glass, metal and brick  
affair. The windows in the longest corridor mostly faced south, so,  
in the afternoons, the sunlight slanted down through those  
windows in thick slabs of light, warming the terrazzo flooring in  
the hall.

One afternoon I was walking alone down the corridor, with the windows on my left. The sun was pouring through brightly. Suddenly I noticed dust-motes floating in that light. They were kindled by it, like tiny stars, a miniature model of the universe hanging before me.

As soon as I noted the dust, I was suddenly shivering with a sense of awe that everything exists. It seemed to me that the vast universe, stretching out to the mysterious quasars, then newly named, and yet containing everything here on earth... elephants, eagles, the Mississippi, the bloodshed in Vietnam, the crowds at Mecca, the rocks in Tierra Del Fuego, the terra cotta cliffs of the Grand Canyon, my grandmother and her fig tree...all of this seemed suddenly astounding and impossible and unlikely. I was filled for a few moments with a sense of the indescribable, the sheer wonder of it all, the whole cosmos quivering inside me, and me inside it, for that one moment, a single reality.

Even though I was going to a Catholic school, and had read the writings of the great mystics like Teresa of Avila, Meister Eckhart and Ruisbroec, I did not attach Christian imagery to the experience. I did not call on the name of God, or imagine I was visited by an angel or seized by the Holy Spirit. I simply fell quiet for a time.

When I went to college and began to read philosophy, I found a philosopher who summarized the meaning of that experience for me with great clarity. Ludwig Wittgenstein was that philosopher. In his 1922 masterwork, the *Tractatus*, you may find the following assertion

“It is not *how* the universe comes to be that prompts the mystical experience, but *that* the universe is.” And later he concluded, “When you experience something about which you cannot speak, remain silent.”

The mystical experience, in short, is a sense of wordless awe before the mystery that everything is. This year I have already

described two similar experiences in my life. And I tried to make clear that these mystical experiences are the ground of why I do what I do as a minister.

Now over the years, I have spoken with many people who describe experiences similar to mine, but they interpret it with a more concrete theological language. They might describe such an experience as the visit of an angel, or even of God speaking with them. Me, I find that I'm distrustful of most cultural interpretations forced on such ineffable experiences: I'd rather take Wittgenstein's advice and keep silent about possible theological meanings.

But, still, I'm convinced that such experiences are found in many cultures and in many human beings, regardless of temperament or physiology. And I am well aware that many people do indeed tie such experiences to their religion.

Thus, because some folks experience awe before the vastness of the mysterious universe, they may be quick to say the God whom they adore must have created it. Now please, when I say this I am not talking about religious fanatics who believe that the world is flat, despite all evidence to the contrary, or that the earth was created in 7 twenty-four-hour days on October 23, 4004 years before our era, and at 9 o'clock in the morning. No, I am talking about more mainstream religious leaders. I am talking about influential clergy like Pat Robertson and the present anti-modernist bishop of Rome, Benedict the 16<sup>th</sup>. I've heard both of these men affirm that God may have created the universe utilizing what scientists have been calling the "Big Bang" to do it. After all, the Big Bang theory of the origin of the universe was developed by a Roman Catholic priest-scientist, a Belgian named Georges Lemaitre. Fr. Lemaitre did not use the term "big bang" for his own theory, however. That phrase was invented, somewhat satirically, by cosmologist Fred Hoyle, who held to a different theory of the universe. Hoyle felt that the infinite universe never had a beginning, because it always was and always will be.

Now I suppose that some people might imagine that if you believe that the universe had no beginning, then you most certainly don't need a God of any kind. However, Fred Hoyle felt that the universe was so tuned for the possibility of life that some sort of ordering God was somehow involved in the universe. (It's important to say, however, that when Hoyle, or any other modern cosmologist, or any Unitarian Universalist for that matter, uses the word God, they are usually never talking about Robertson's or Benedict the 16<sup>th</sup>'s strict, conservative God.)

And, on the other side of issue, there are plenty of modern cosmologists who, having perfected Fr. Lamaitre's theory of the Big Bang, and being convinced by all present evidence that the universe indeed had a beginning some 15 billion years ago or so, give or take a couple of billion, find no reason at all for assuming a creator God got the whole thing started. Our Nobel Laureate, Dr. Lederman, describes the origin, or genesis of the universe clearly in the first reading. He is perfectly happy imagining that the universe just began because existing laws caused it to happen, just like that. Many modern cosmologists use the admittedly difficult phrase "quantum fluctuation" to suggest the condition which caused the universe to bang into being. The word "fluctuation" sounds rather wild to me, like a sudden shift in wind during a storm.

While reading about "quantum fluctuations" this week, I couldn't help but remember the witty dialogue found in Aristophanes' comic play, *The Clouds*, written twenty-four-hundred years ago. It goes like this: A man named Strepsiades asks Sokrates: "What causes thunder?"

Sokrates says, "The clouds, when they roll over each other."

"But how can that be?" Strepsiades asks.

"Well," says Sokrates, "the clouds, being full of the water which becomes rain, are forced to move along by the wind. Naturally,

they bump into each other causing the great noise you call thunder.”

“But is it not the God Zeus who causes the clouds to move about in the first place?”

“Not at all,” muses Sokrates. “Our whole system of weather is caused by a constant whirlwind blowing about the earth.”

“Oh,” says Strepsiades, “a whirlwind. So you are telling me that Zeus no longer exists, but that whirlwind has taken his place?”

In a nutshell, Aristophanes’ bitterly hilarious satire summarizes the present theological debate about the mystery of the origin of the universe. Some say that it came about by some sort of all powerful being called God. And others say it simply came into existence because of the all-powerful potentials hidden in the mysterious whirlwind called “quantum fluctuations.”

Now you may think that ancient peoples all believed that the universe was created by divinity, and that only in the twentieth century did we discover that the universe may have come about in another way. Brian Swimm says as much in the affirmation we read this morning. Now, literally speaking, he is right, of course. But only literally. For if you imagine that all former people believed in a creator, you would be wrong. In the Middle Ages, for example, Hildebert of Lavardin, the archbishop of Tour, thought of the universe, or nature, as self-generating. Thierry of Chartres, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, even wrote of “evolutionary principles” and spoke of matter as “self-generating.” Thierry, like Fred Hoyle, felt that there was a God *in* the universe, but this God was not a creator, evolution being “self-driven.” Even some of the ancient scriptures suggest that God did not so much create the universe out of nothing, as simply shape what was already there. The book of Genesis/Bereshith was distorted by the King James translation committee. Nowhere does it say: “In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth.” The Hebrew “Bereshith bara Elohim” is



accurately translated in this way “When God began to fashion the sky and the earth, the earth was nothing but a whirl of watery chaos, with a powerful wind blowing over the primordial abyss.” You see? God does not create the universe, but rather finds this great big watery mess and then simply structures it for human need. Many other creation stories follow the same pattern, not creation out of nothing, but a sudden outburst of order in the middle of chaotic eternity. When read in scholarly fairness, many of the most ancient human stories do not seem too far removed from our own modern creation story. “There was once neither existence nor non-existence. There was neither space, nor the sky. Was anything stirring? Who really knows how the universe came to be?” asked the ancient Hindu scripture, the Rg Veda, written down, we think, 3500 years ago. “Maybe it formed itself, and perhaps it did not.”

Of course, to any conservative theologian, the idea that the universe may have simply popped into being is very threatening. Religious conservatives have always harassed scientists who wanted to study the universe and what made it tick. This was true a thousand years before the Scopes Monkey Trial and the invention of fundamentalism, too. William of Conches wrote the following around the year 1120: “Because these conservatives do not understand the forces of the universe, they wish to impede all research in these areas. They want us to become comrades in their ignorance, and join in the foolish faith of peasants who ever refuse to ask the question ‘why?’ Whenever they think someone is engaging in science and research, they immediately brand that person a heretic.”

Now myself, of course, I think that scientific research into the origins should continue without ceasing. And I must add that the scientific method is a way of approaching things that has nothing to do with theology, since theology is an arrangement of assertions, and the scientific method is an orderly approach to research. You must know that there are conventionally religious people who are also scientists...like the priest who first came up with the Big Bang

theory of creation. They find no conflict in such dual work. This is because they are not fanatics.

The kind of fanatics who decry the work of science, both in William of Conches time, and in our own, are just that, fanatics. Like the guy who wrote a letter to the Dispatch editor this week decrying COSI, our science museum, as an “atheist indoctrination center.” He condemns the museum because it regularly shows a film on volcanoes which assumes the cosmic evolution of the earth out of cosmic stardust.

I say there is no ordinary reasoning with such a man. As I read his letter with incredulity, I came to see how he actually lives in his own universe, a universe of his own creation, where neither any decent idea of God nor quantum fluctuation has any meaning. For this act of isolation from the rest of the world, I can only feel sadness.

No, for me, the creation or origin of the universe remains deliciously mysterious. The story as it has been developed by modern cosmologists is a great story, and one that fills me with wonder and astonishment. But that wonder and astonishment is not the deepest source of my religious feelings. Wittgenstein’s old dictum that “It is not *how* the universe comes to be that prompts the mystical experience, but *that* the universe is” remains in force for me. That there is anything at all, rather than nothing astounds me day after day. The how’s and whys are interesting, sure. They get me to thinking. Or sometimes, if I am reading Steven Hawking or some other modern physicist of note who takes up this question, I even arrive at a state of mind which must resemble that of a zen abbot at meditation...what, after all, does a *quantum fluctuation* look like? It’s pretty imageless. And it’s not all that cuddly, that’s for sure.

But that’s why I tend to down my meal of hard “how’s and whys” with a sweet glass of mystical experience, something that warms me on the way down, and speaks of relationship more than cause, of deep connection more than cool information.

The children's story, "All I See is Part of Me," tries to say this by means of the image of light both near and far. The child in the story recognizes kinship with all the universe. Not just kinship, but identity. As the late great Carl Sagan used to put it, "We human beings are the universe coming to know itself."

And our poet, Pattiann Rogers, gives us a starlit poem that expresses the mystery of reality, not in terms of story but in terms of total immersion into the "thatness" of the universe. She sees herself as totally one with all of creation. "I'm surrounded by stars. They cover me completely like an invisible silk veil full of sequins. They touch me, one by one, everywhere. They are the luminescence of blood and circuit the body. What can be nearer to flesh than light? I swallow stars. I eat stars. I breathe stars. They come with immediacy. No knife, no death can part us."

Exactly. That sense of the seamlessness of all things in the universe is what I experienced on that afternoon 40 years ago while walking down the sunlit halls of my high school. I experienced not a sense of story, but a sense of belonging, and even identity. And although I love the eternal mystery story of creation as it has been developed by people like Brian Swimme or Dr. Lederman, in the end I love my home, the universe, which is the theme of that story all the more. It is the universe, which sparkles around me here and now, which I experience. I can have no experience of the source of the universe. And I am convinced that my experience of belonging and love in the universe is what moves me through the world with whatever confidence, care, fierceness and fidelity I have.

I cannot know what your own experience of the universe might be, or if you have a theory of its creation which you favor. But I hope you, at least now and then, know an experience within this universe in Wittgenstein's words, "about which you cannot speak." And then you, like Van Gogh, can remain silent under his starry night, or sit down in peace like I do now.

## **Offertory**

For the beauty of the earth,  
For the splendor of the skies,  
For the love which from our birth  
Over and around us lies,  
We give thanks, by giving  
A portion of our livelihood  
to the common endeavor of this community.  
We are all in this together.  
We all share a common responsibility.

## **Closing Litany for Earth Day**

**We are here**

Now in this moment

**We are here**

All on this earth

**We are here**

At home together

**We are here**

To know our worth

**We are here**

To care with wisdom

**We are here**

To give love birth

**We are here**