

Trinity Episcopal Church

650 Rahway Avenue

Woodbridge, New Jersey 07095

and

The Episcopal Church of the Epiphany

1393 York Avenue

New York, NY 10021

1 Christmas (C)

December 29 and 30, 2018

A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish

“Way back”

DRAFT

John 1:1-18

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 without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true

light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who

comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.””) From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Come into our darkness, Lord Jesus, and give us your light and your love forever.

Amen.

In just three days, from Christmas to today, we have gone from the Baby to the

Beginning, from the beginning of time to the incarnation of the Logos of God as our Savior Jesus Christ, a span of nearly fourteen billion years, billion with a “b”.

After the “Big Bang” two hundred million years after the Big Bang, astrophysicists tell us that for the very first time light came through a previously dark nothingness. And that light continues to pervade every corner of the universe, still moving outward and outward as our universe continually expands, second by second, year by year, millennia by millennia. But what we know we know largely because of where light can be seen. The head of the joint Smithsonian

and Harvard University astrophysics department in Cambridge, Massachusetts, noted in a lecture I attended recently in Boston that indeed over sixty or seventy percent of the universe is made up of “Dark Matter” and “Dark Energy” which scientists do not at all understand, but this Dark Matter and Dark Energy seems to hold all the universe in place in a relative sense of the word “hold” since the universe continues to expand at an amazing and accelerating rate; but Dark Matter and Dark Energy cannot constrain light except in certain specific circumstances we call Black Holes which are in the center of every galaxy of

the universe and which can actually capture light and matter and keep them from ever escaping. So on a universal, cosmological, level, light and dark still are testing each other, but so far light continues to prevail by a very, very wide margin since the universe continues to expand, and there is nothing theoretically or practically that says that light will ever be extinguished, no matter how hard Dark Holes try to capture as much light as they can. In short, light always comes out ahead, and there is no theoretically known way that darkness will ever be able to extinguish light. Both light and darkness are things, they are not

nothingnesses; light and dark are somethings. Light and dark both have existences. But always light prevails over dark except right at a dark hole which draws light into itself never to again be released.

To show the power of light, Harvard University and the Smithsonian Institute are cooperating with sixteen European countries (not including the United States) which are funding and building what will be the largest telescope in the world on a very high mountain in Chile: Construction of this new telescope, the European Extremely Large Telescope (E-ELT), began in August of last year, 2014, and is a ground-based extremely

large telescope for the optical/near-infrared range, currently being built by the European Southern Observatory (ESO) on top of Cerro Armazones in the Atacama Desert of northern Chile, just south of Bolivia and just west of Argentina.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_Extremely_Large_Telescope

The E-ELT will search for extrasolar planets — planets orbiting other stars. This will include not only the discovery of planets down to Earth-like masses through indirect measurements of the wobbling motion of stars perturbed by the planets that orbit them, but also by the direct imaging of

larger planets and where possible even to characterize their atmospheres as to whether they contain life-necessary oxygen. The telescope will attempt to image Earthlike exoplanets, to see if there is any possibility of any of them containing the element oxygen which is absolutely essential for life as we know it. (See under the heading, “Science Goals”)

The particular ‘talent’ or ability of this new giant telescope will be to detect and analyze the atmospheres of planets circling other stars throughout the universe—there are actually only a very limited number of stars that have planets circling them.

This telescope, according to the head Smithsonian/Harvard astrophysicist, this telescope in about the year 2024, eight years from now, will allow us to begin to look back to the point where light had not yet escaped darkness, about 200 million years after the Big Bang occurred, a period called the “Dark Age”.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_Southern_Observatory

(See the note there under the heading “Age of the Universe”).

The head astrophysicist said that before then, before the Dark Age, light had not managed to free itself from dark matter and

dark energy, so we cannot see further back to the beginning of our universe than about two hundred million years after everything we know began. The Big Bang is now dated to have occurred approximately 13.8 billion years ago. Before that there was nothingness as far as our universe was concerned. But our theology of course says that God was “in the beginning”, God “was” before the beginning of our universe, and even our scripture lesson today from John’s Gospel tells us that the way God created everything in the beginning was through his Son, the Logos, the Word of God. And the further astounding thing that our Gospel

lesson today proclaims is that that very Word of God some thirteen point eight billion years after the Big Bang, that that Word or Logos of God actually became incarnate, took on flesh, became a human being right here on our very planet Earth. Jesus Christ is actually the human form of the person of God, the Logos, the incarnated Logos, who formed the universe nearly fourteen billion years ago. Jesus was the Logos in the flesh.

The head of the Smithsonian/Harvard astrophysics department said that the uniqueness of Planet Earth is so profound that they are within searching the last

approximately hundred stars in the universe for signs of life on planets circling those stars; and he said furthermore that so far absolutely no planet around any star anywhere else in the universe has been found to have oxygen in its atmosphere which would be a potential sign of life on it, and there are many such planets, but still a very limited number of planets orbiting stars other than our sun; our sun itself is extremely but not entirely unique in having a ‘solar system’ of planets orbiting it.

Current telescopes have determined that none of those planets orbiting other stars have any trace of atmospheric oxygen, the

key element for life to begin. So far, our Planet Earth is unique among all planets throughout all the known universe in having the presence of oxygen in its atmosphere-- oxygen, the element that is absolutely essential for animal life to begin and evolve. Our little planet Earth so far is unique among all other billions and billions of possibilities. As far as we have been able to tell, life is only here, right here on our little planet rotating around our star, the Sun. There is no atmosphere on Mars, so there is no life on Mars, he explained. Venus has only carbon dioxide, so Venus cannot support animal life, and the fact that Venus

has no oxygen in its atmosphere proves Venus also has no plant life. And no other planet in our Solar System can even come close to the probability of life that is still impossible on both Mars and Venus because none of the other planets either have no atmosphere or have an atmosphere with no oxygen at all. However, however, it is conceivable that the carbon dioxide of Venus, a hotter planet than earth, a planet in our Solar System that is closer to the sun than Earth, I believe it is conceivable that the carbon dioxide of Venus could be exploited by sophisticated existing technology and some living Earth plants to

be able to support life by splitting its carbon dioxide atmosphere into oxygen and carbon in regions near the poles of Venus that are coolest and thus most moderate in temperature and closest to the temperatures of Earth at our equator, and the least offensive places for human life to be sustained on Venus; but the cost would be very high to convert the atmosphere of Venus into adequate amounts of oxygen to sustain human life. On the other hand, the planet Mars, however, is farther from the sun than Earth and thus is too cold everywhere on its surface to be a good sustainable planet for human life; and

furthermore Mars essentially has no atmosphere whatsoever, just like our moon, although it is theoretically conceivable that the oxygen bound into the rocks on Mars could be chemically released and used to produce oxygen for human life, but it would be prohibitively expensive to do that, and the cost of heating a place on Mars to a human sustainable temperature would also be prohibitive. On the other hand, essentially every living plant on Earth converts carbon dioxide into oxygen and carbon and could thus be used to make some part of Venus under a dome livable for human life; actually the chemical equation is

that plants convert a combination of molecules of water and molecules of carbon dioxide into oxygen and hydrocarbons and/or carbohydrates. Oxygen and water are the key essentials for the development of animal life, and eventually through evolution, sentient life, life that could eventually reason and think. Without oxygen, there can be no animals, and animals are the only living creatures that have any higher ability to think, since plants do not “think” in any real sense of that word. And at the highest point on that chain of sentient life are we human beings. And of course, we human beings absolutely need

oxygen to exist, to live; without oxygen and water our cells simply die.

So now in the next eight to ten or so years we are down to observing the last hundred or so stars with planets which conceivably could have life, and the new telescope by about 2024 should be able to discern if there is any oxygen containing planet ‘out there’ anywhere. The search goes on, of course, but as far as any scientist can tell at this moment of our telescope technology, we humans are absolutely unique as thinking beings in the whole universe. And even if we should find a star with a planet containing an atmosphere, it

would be millions of light years away with no way to communicate with us. So the actual possibility of “Star Wars” is essentially nil, in spite of the popularity of the movie sequel which is currently the rage. We are indeed at Star Peace and will remain so as long as our human race can survive on Planet Earth, or possibly on Planet Venus.

Also, without light, without light energy, there can be no plants of significance. Light is also absolutely essential for the sustainable formation of oxygen from carbon dioxide and water by plants. Light provide plants the essential energy to split the oxygen away from the carbon of carbon

dioxide. In plants that process is called “photosynthesis”. Photosynthesis splits carbon and water into oxygen and hydrocarbons and carbohydrates. And we humans live on those hydrocarbons and carbohydrates and on nitrogen containing matter which itself is formed from the nitrogen which is plentiful in Earth’s atmosphere and which is activated and made available to Earth life originally by lightning. So, a second or third requirement for generated life on any planet is to have nitrogen as well as oxygen. Thus, you can see how absolutely unique Planet Earth is in all the known universe. Earth has in its

atmosphere and on its surface oxygen, water, and nitrogen, the three main essentials for life. And now we know the life potential for all but maybe one millionth of one percent of all existing stars and their planets. Without a doubt, we humans are positively unique in all the universe. So where else would the Son of God come to reside but to Planet Earth? It is actually no surprise, knowing what we now know about the universe, that God chose to come here, to Planet Earth, to make God's very self known to us by his only Son Jesus the Messiah. Jesus came to show us finally what God is like, what God looks like in

human form and more importantly what God does to offer any of us Earthlings an opportunity for life eternal with God. God God-self has no matter; God is totally Spirit; and only Spirit will ever survive eternally; and if we allow God to put God's Spirit into our very beings, we too will be eternal, we too will survive forever. And the fact that God loves us human beings and has shown God's love for us in having his Son sacrifice his life on the Cross of Golgotha, on Calvary hill, how else could we acknowledge the love God has for us than to recognize how much God loves us and to love God by loving and following God's only Son? He is

our only chance to survive forever. Trust in
Jesus Christ and be saved for all eternity.

Amen.

Description:

The beginning of the Gospel of John portends the beginning of the universe, and beyond. God was and is all. Jesus was there. And he lives on to bring light into our dark world.

Tags:

Mars, Venus, carbon, dioxide, oxygen, telescope, life, beginning, God, Jesus, Christ, Logos, plants, animals, light, dark, Harvard University, Smithsonian Institute, Bang, Big, Extremely Large, E-ELT, Chile, Bolivia, energy, holes, matter, physicist

**A Sermon preached at
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by the Rev. Joe Parrish**

Lord Jesus, be known to us in the
breaking of the bread. Amen.

A few years ago I overheard a discussion
of some young parents. One said, 'I have

been going to church all these years, I was confirmed, and you mean to tell me that Jesus is God? No one said that before, and I have been going to church for years!’

Maybe this is exactly the word we need to hear this Sunday before the New Year, that Jesus is indeed God, and Jesus is also the only Son of God. It is an amazing revelation, and one which most of the world outside of church denies, ignores, or is just plain uninterested in. But John’s Gospel puts this amazing fact right in our faces today. God has come to earth; God’s Son is fully divine, and also fully human. On this we can stake our faith. God physically

entered our universe in the form of a tiny baby born to a young woman named Mary. And furthermore, the Septuagint version of the prophecy in Isaiah replaces the word ‘young woman’ with ‘virgin’ several centuries after Isaiah wrote. And that fact of a virgin birth many even in the church seem to doubt. But regardless, it is a statement of our faith in both the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds, that Jesus was born of a virgin.

Today John’s Gospel extends that incredible creedal statement even further to tell us that the Word existed in the very beginning of all things, and indeed the Word even existed before the beginning of all

things, as the Word was very much the active agent bringing the physical universe into being.

For the past decade or more, physicists have been debating a description of the universe as being an eleven dimensional entity that describes all existence, all reality, as a “membrane” or “brane”, spelled “B-R-A-N-E”. This “membrane” that forms our universe also has an alternative universe that coexists with it, so it is postulated but not yet proven. One astrophysicist explained that our universe has an unusual property in its gravity in that gravity is a very, very weak force in our universe. Yet electrical

charges and magnetism are much stronger forces. He postulated that in an alternative version of our universe, that gravity could be a very, very strong force, and electrical charges and magnetism could be very, very weak forces. In such an alternative universe, things would not have much mass at all since strong gravity would squash everything, so matter and charge and magnetism would be very insignificant. In such an alternative universe we could recognize things by their appearance, but physical interaction would not occur since there would be very little mass, very little electrical charge, and very little magnetism.

It is an interesting hypothesis that one could see in such an alternative universe many of the things we have postulated about heaven—that in heaven we do not marry and are not given in marriage, as one of Jesus' pieces of wisdom says; solid things would essentially not exist, so the absence of marriage would be understandable. Without physical bodies aging would not happen. And angels would not need wings to fly in that alternative universe, as they would have next to nothing in terms of bodies to move up or down.

I don't think I have read of anyone postulating that heaven is an 'alternative

universe’, and it would take some considerable reflection to evaluate the various ramifications of such a model of heaven, but it is interesting that the latest in scientific thinking would not be so contrary to such a possibility.

And in these eleven dimensional spaces, there could be what might be termed a ‘singularity’, a point of contact, where the two universes sort of ‘come together’. That point would be, in the words of today’s Gospel, the Word. On one side of this singularity the Word would be, well, a Word ‘spoken’ by God; on the other side of this singularity, in our own so-called physical

universe, the Word would be a solid, a personality, an actual person, Jesus Christ.

In actuality, in our physical universe there are indeed instances of ‘intruders’ from another space-time continuum, and they go between the two ‘universes’ up and down a ladder, Jacob’s ladder, if you can recall that story when Jacob fell asleep and had a vision of angels going up and down a ladder into heaven. New Testament writers refer to Jesus as being that actual ‘ladder’ between heaven and earth. So the two universe analogy is still a relatively good one. Both universes, or as the Bible tells it, both the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom

on earth connect through the singularity of Jesus Christ, Lord of Lords, first begotten of the Father, the Word made flesh.

So in this imaginary science fiction journey we have just made, mass-less and weightless things from that ‘other’ universe or Kingdom, pass into our universe as ‘solid things’, as angels, that announce, embody God’s messages, bring ‘healing in their wings’, and generally help relate us to God who created all things both in heaven and on earth, in the ‘spiritual’ dimension, and in our physical dimension.

Well, this is a reveille of science fiction, I know, but maybe there is something that

helps us connect with how we get 'to' the other Kingdom. We say we get there through faith in Christ, and indeed, how can one ascend a ladder they do not believe in? One first finds the ladder that leads to where we want to go, then one simply ascends it through our faith. We cannot 'make' the ladder, our deeds have no facility to construct such a ladder, we are totally dependent on the grace and good will of that ladder to let us ascend into heaven to be with Christ in his glory and light.

Light would exist on both sides of that ladder; in this universe we who see can affirm that. And in our creeds and our

gospel messages, we understand that light is something that overcomes darkness, both in the physical sense, and truly in the spiritual sense. When we are walking in darkness, far from God and away from God's illumination, we lose our way. But just as even a very tiny light can light up a lot of darkness, we can point our eyes in the way of the light of Christ to find our spiritual path through Christ into Heaven, the heavenly realm, the realm where spiritual truth is all that exists. But on this side of that divide between heaven and earth, we are constantly besieged by various hucksters brandishing this and that variety of truth,

most of whom have no pathway out of this universe. And when this universe finally perishes, we who follow such non-messiahs would perish with this universe, dust to dust, ashes to ashes, never to see the light of Christ again.

The Gospel according to John affirms Jesus as “the light of all people” and “The true light, which enlightens everyone”. Christ is the source of light, not a reflected sort of light as John the Baptist and others would have been, but Jesus is the true brightness that shows us the way into his Father’s Kingdom. And the affirmation of

Jesus as the authentic light means we do not need to look elsewhere.

Nicky Gumbel who later authored the Alpha Bible study course which is now used worldwide said he was a confirmed atheist up until a deciding moment when he was at college. His friends Nicky Lee and Nicky Lee's girlfriend Cilla had gone to a revival held in another town, and upon their return they came into Nicky Gumbel's college dorm room and told him the good news that they had accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior. This threw Nicky Gumbel into a profound personal crisis, wondering how two of his best friends could have been

swayed into becoming members of some sort of strange sect, like the Moonies, or even worse. So he resolved to look deeper into the various avenues of religion to discern what could be done for his two friends to rescue them from these Christians. He says he decided to read the sacred literature of all the main world religions, Buddhism, Hinduism, Mohammadism, Confucianism, and so on to see what alternatives he could offer his two friends. Then he looked around his dorm room but only found one writing to begin with, a very old tattered version of the Bible. So he said he began reading the Bible for the first time

in his life. Nicky Gumbel had written a paper earlier in his school career which he thought showed the logical inconsistency of a belief in God, and he was nearly awarded the school prize in Religious Education for his class paper. But he had never actually read the Bible. So he picked up that old book and recalled hearing that Christians particularly liked the New Testament.

Nicky said he began reading Matthew, then he read through the Gospel of Mark, followed by Luke. Then at about 3 o'clock in the morning he fell asleep soon after reading the introductory chapter in the gospel of John that we heard today. When

he awoke, he continued reading through John's Gospel and suddenly found that he understood what had happened to his friends Nicky Lee and Cilla. He had come to see that the message of the Bible was consistent, complementary, and concise about the Lordship of Jesus; and Nicky Gumbel became a Christian right on the spot.

While I am not sure reading the Bible from cover to cover will make everyone a Christian, I would encourage you to do so today if you have doubts in your heart this morning. It only took Nicky Gumbel a few hours to read all the Gospels and to make his decision for Christ. So I would challenge

you to put your belief system to that test. Finding a better way than Christ is not an easy thing to do. In fact, I would say that finding a way to true light other than Christ is not possible. So take the time to prove me wrong, and to set the Gospel of John on its ear. This gospel affirms Jesus as the only true light, and I am confident you will find the same for your own life if you will take this Gospel challenge.

Amen.