

Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and Neighborhood House  
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It's a Family Affair  
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Sermon Notes (unedited notes used for delivering the sermon)

Preparing for the After-life. The Reunion. A Family Affair.

It is a reunion that only faith assures us will happen. And the faith is stronger than all that might attempt to thwart it.

I am not sure how much most people talk about leaving this world, this phase of being for the next. As a pastor, a chaplain at a trauma one center, and a family member – death, this life, the next life, the desire to make sense of it all, to trust in images we pretty much know are – at best pointers to what we can expect – and, yes, and the desire for miracles in the midst of it all...after all, I do believe in miracles...

Well, they are things that I seem to talk about frequently and consider in my own time, as well, perhaps you do as well.

I don't see such conversations as "downers." They are important. Death, transition, passing – whatever the words we use – are all part of life, not the end of life. Life existed long before we were here and will long after. It's the form of such pre and post human experience we have trouble with, where did we come from, where is it we are going to – not even the sense that we didn't come from or aren't going to – we believe that. We just want to know. Maybe what we want to know is "Will it be better than it is sometimes here...."

We're not the only ones who have thought such things or question such things. Listen to Paul's opening to the Thessalonians,

*"And regarding the question, friends, that has come up about what happens to those already dead and buried..."* or put another way. What happens to us when **we** die? When will this suffering end?"

What Paul and the many followers of Jesus believed was that in Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection – the tension between the pull of this earth of capturing all life and bringing it to the Underworld (Hades) - was overcome, conquered by Jesus' resurrection. After three days – Jesus rose from the dead.

Whatever cosmic struggle may have taken place in those three days – Jesus won, he overcame death – sin – the great separation between humankind and God; keeping his promise: his Word, that he was going to his Father/his Mother where he would prepare a place for us. Along with the promise that he was always with us.

The Great Transcendence between this world and the next, now completed in the intersection of the cross.

It is a promise that the ancients believed then and that we, many of us, believe now. It is the foundation of our faith, celebrated in everything we do, known to us deeply in every fiber of our being, while sometimes questioned – even doubted by our minds. The struggle between the earth bound Hades and the Heavenly mansions of heaven that early Christians struggled with in their expectations for a quick resolution – Continues 2000 years later, in a bit of a different way.

Science has removed some of the “old magic” or narratives created to explain what folks then could not understand [we know for example that there is no physical underworld in our planet, as least we are pretty sure] with my apology to the Middle Earth colonies.

But we still don't have the after death part figured out much beyond what our faith and experiences tell us – with the struggle and the doubt now transformed from observing the physical and creating narratives to explain it – to the revelations of science and the non-sciences.

So we unpack the science – in which no answer for the spiritual has yet to be captured. To this day, the science and the spiritual stand separate and apart; even though there often seems to be conversation between the two.

It is the place often where “science fiction” finds its roots in the tension between what we know and imagine.

But faith is not something we imagine. It is something we know. Something we believe. Something we feel, experience and trust in. It is faith. Belief in things unseen – but known. Beyond our ability to understand, not beyond our ability to know.

“weren't our hearts burning when he spoke with us” said the travelers on the Emmaus path when Jesus, unrecognized was with them? Don't our hearts burn, as well in our prayers and our petitions – even if we cannot always recognize why?

Still, by nature, by God-given nature we will try to understand – and sometimes the science leads us close to the grandness of God beyond all the arts and sciences.

I've been reading a book by Keith Ward called The Big Questions in Science and Religion for a study group of which I am a part. It's a fascinating book that enters into that tension between science and religion and sometimes, surprisingly, finds itself pointing toward some God center as the newest of sciences unfold.

In one passage, the author talks about a distant future, in which just as our data is stored on the magnetic drives of our computers, and our earth is surrounded by magnetic fields, and the universe immersed in magnetic pulses from all sorts of places – his hypothesis – far out as it is – is that our lives: our data – is all stored somehow in these fields when we leave this form, transferred from one drive to another... here are his words to explain it and the “outcome” that comes close to a cosmological resurrection:

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[There] are ... those who think that conscious intelligent life could expand to fill the whole cosmos and could, in a subjective sense, become immortal.

Admittedly, there is no guarantee of this, but it depends on “fascinating physics, most of which is quite well understood.” As Freeman Dyson claimed, in a 1978 paper in the prestigious journal *Reviews of Modern Physics*, as the universe expands and cools, lower-energy quanta of energy [that is A packet of radiation possessing energy] would be needed to store and transmit information.

So a virtually infinite amount of information could be processed in an objectively finite time toward the end of the life of the universe. Perhaps—and we are thinking billions of years into the future—thoughts and memories could be downloaded into magnetic fields that could exist in the darkness of interstellar space.

Frank Tipler, in his 1994 work *The Physics of Immortality*, supposes that the virtually infinite intelligences that might exist in the far-future universe would be able to recover all information from the past, and would choose to reconstitute all living beings who had ever existed. Thus, in the creation by advanced intergalactic intelligences of replicas of past humans, we have a scientific form of the hypothesis of the resurrection of the dead.

It seems conceivable that intelligent life could thus cover the cosmos. It might even find a way to download itself through black holes or space/time warps into newly created universes.

In a strange way, modern physics is able to translate some religious hopes of a “new creation” into a possible scientific scenario. Of course, this is all fantastic, but it seems to be physically possible. And is this vision of a universe that culminates in a universal and final flourishing of intelligent life really any less plausible than the impersonal and value-free vision propounded by others, of a universe that simply decays into unconscious chaos?

The struggle that we too often have is with our concept of “time.” Time seems to be something to us during which we have limited opportunity to achieve some specified or unspecified outcome before the opportunity is gone.

So we accelerate to try and capture as much as we can in time – before the time is up. Or, if we are waiting for something to happen, we watch the clock, the ticking of the hand in anticipation.

The early followers of Jesus, based on their culture, knowledge, traditions, and the plethora of myths and influences of other religions – had them believing that Jesus would “return” soon – in their lifetime. And, when that didn’t happen as they expected, doubt, questioning, all sorts of things forced them to learn what it is we are still being forced to learn –

The unfolding of God’s plans will be in God’s time, which has nothing to do with when this service starts, whether or not the clocks turn back, or whether or not we can escape the passage of time by accelerating beyond the speed of light.

Nothing. God’s time is like nothing we understand. And still, even in the knowledge of science the traditions of world religions and history, the apparently expanding ability of our intellects and consciousness to grasp ever grander bits of information –

Nothing takes away the knowing we have as a result of our faith. A resilient faith, that even when seemingly battered and disrupted, continues to be present – believing in God and heaven and afterlife, whether or not it takes the forms of the science of 2000 years ago or the science of billions of years from now.

We are of a faith that transcends all we can know – and the best part, the calming and assuring part, the eternal part – is that no matter what we discover or learn –

What we have always known is true: we are of God, with God, and whether here or elsewhere will always be embraced in God’s great love and promise.

And our faith tells us it is so.