

Lent Is Not Rocket Science:

An Exploration of God,
Creation, and the Cosmos

Meditations for 40 Days of Lent

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An Invitation to View Lent from a New Perspective

For a long time Christians understood that there were two ways to learn about God. One was by studying the revelations that God made through the writings collected into Holy Scripture. The other was by applying our senses to the world around, the creation that God made and then declared “very good” (Genesis 1:31) This second way of learning about God and God’s intentions for humankind is called Natural Theology. The word theology literally means “words about God,” so Natural Theology means “Nature’s words about God.”

During the Reformation in the sixteenth century, theologians began to become increasingly wary of humanity’s ability to use reason properly. During the medieval period, the “scholastic” movement within theology had worked to apply the best of classical philosophical thought, primarily that of Aristotle, to reasoning about God. This way of thinking reasoned that the Earth was the center

of the universe, that the lights in the sky revolved around it, and that planets moved because of the angels who propelled them with their wings. But as scientific observations about the nature of the solar system and gravity began to overthrow these ideas, theologians reacted by giving more importance to the revelation of Holy Scripture than that of Natural Theology. Today the situation has gotten so extreme in parts of the church that special courses taught in schools and universities focus on “Christian Science” and hold that anything that is seen to contradict the literal and plain meaning of Holy Scripture must be considered wrong and be dismissed. This leads some Christians to be suspicious of the study of evolution, cosmology, and geology.

During this Lent, I invite you to return to an earlier understanding of Natural Theology. I invite you to see it as a channel of revelation about the nature of God that is not absolute in itself, but is an equal partner in conversation with Holy Scriptures and the traditions of the church. Paying attention to the world around us—to the intricate structures of nature, to the mind-bending reality of the cosmic and microscopic realms—will invite

us to recognize that the God we worship, and with whom we have an ongoing relationship, is present in the raging storm, the fiery whirlwind of the surface of a star, and the deep silence of intergalactic space.

I invite you to open all of your senses to seek God's presence in nature. God is not nature, nor is God bounded by nature, but God is most certainly nature's author—and nature's "words" can point us onward to that which is beyond its bounds. In the coming days and weeks of Lent, I invite you to journey from the largest scale of the created order inward to the very smallest scale we can speak about. Some of the images will be familiar, some of them will require a bit of meditation and imagination to understand, but all will hopefully lead us to new insights about God's relationship with us.

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Ash Wednesday

First the Fire

And the fire will test what sort of work each has done.

— 1 Corinthians 3:13

Many Episcopalians and other Christians will have ashes placed on their foreheads in the sign of the cross today. And many congregations make their ashes the day before, by burning the palms from the previous year's Palm Sunday service.

When I was a parish priest, I started asking people in the middle of the season of Epiphany to bring in any palms that had been blessed and that they wished to recycle. We collected the dried-out palms in a bag in the sacristy during the weeks leading up to Lent. After the traditional pancake supper on Fat Tuesday, the day of celebration before Ash Wednesday, I gathered the children to help me with burning the palms.

Over the years I had perfected my technique: Find an aluminum baking pan, a large tin can, and three small, similar-sized rocks. Place the rocks in

the bottom of the pan. Use a can opener to take the top and bottom off the tin can so that it becomes a large empty cylinder. Place the cylinder on top of the three rocks. (Children and parents often asked me why I used three rocks, expecting that it had something to do with the Trinity or Richard Hooker's three-legged stool. I wish I had come up with a better explanation than the one that is the truth—it simply takes three points to make a stable balance for the cylinder.)

On Fat Tuesday I took the palms that we had collected and stuffed them down into the cylinder. I then used a long-necked butane lighter to light the palms on fire from the very bottom of the cylinder. As the bottoms of the palms smoldered, they gave off a growing cloud of tan smoke. Once the tan smoke was rising in a thick column, I put the long-necked lighter back down at the bottom of the can and made a new flame. That flame ignited the column of smoke into a column of fire, and the palms in the can rapidly turned to ash. (I always kept the children way back for this part, of course.) After the fire died out and the ashes were cooled, the children and I took forks and smashed the remaining ashes into smaller and smaller bits

until only a fine powder remained. I used that fine powder the next day as the dust for Ash Wednesday.

The reason the second small flame makes such a dramatic change in the way the palms burn is because when something “burns” what actually ignites are the gasses given off by the material that is decomposing in the heat. The gas is the release of all the complicated organic molecules that the palm tree gathered from the soil in which it grew and the atmosphere it breathed, then combined with the rainwater from the sky and the energy of the sunlight, and stored in the cells of its branches. The first fire that I lit started taking apart all that work, so that the organic molecules trapped in the cellulose of the palm would be freed and lit. The second flame I used ignited the gasses in the rising column of tan smoke, and their ignition created the small fireball and dramatic column of flame.

I find it very evocative that the ashes we use on this day come from the destruction of the work of creation. The microbes and cellular creatures of creation labored for years to organize the minerals and chemicals that made up the structure of the leaf of palm. When we cut the leaf off the tree,

taking it away from its source of nourishment and water, those cells began to die. They dried out and become mere husks of what they once were. But the fire of Fat Tuesday released the molecules back into the atmosphere so that a new plant could use them again. Fire, water, air, and Earth are all present in the moment of the creation of the ashes. And though we put the end product on our foreheads, the life-giving parts have been returned to creation to be used again and again.

In our own lives there are times when the fire must come to release the elements we've stored up in careful, complicated containers in our hearts. Ash Wednesday reminds us not to fear that experience but to see in it the wonder of God's economy, the working out of the plan of creation and salvation.



Where is the fire going to come into your heart this Lent?

And what will it release to others?

What needs to be broken down in you to release the fire of the Holy Spirit in your life this Lent?

Thursday after Ash Wednesday

Joseph Butler and the *Analogy*

*My beloved speaks and says to me:
“Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.”*

— The Song of Solomon 2:10

How should science and religion speak to each other? It’s not clear. Science is built on a ladder of deductions and observations. Religion, particularly in the case of Christianity, is built on revelation and experience. Given that the two disciplines are different at this fundamental level, finding a common language has always been difficult.

In the earliest days of the church, there was no divide between natural philosophy and theology. One led directly to the other, and people studied natural philosophy—what we typically call “science” today—on the way to their work in theology. But during the Renaissance of Western thought, when pre-Christian thinkers were being rediscovered and studied, a gulf began to grow between

the two disciplines. The way scientists and theologians did their work became an increasing barrier to the conversation many expected them to have. The problem became more acute as time went by.

Joseph Butler, Bishop of Durham in the mid-eighteenth century, wrote a book that was primarily a response to the new thinking that Isaac Newton's work had begun. Newton's laws of motion and gravitation allowed the natural philosophers of his day to make predictions that were a revelation to their time. Things we take for granted today—like predicting the exact date of an eclipse, describing the flight of a canon ball, or understanding how a barrel of water drains from a spigot—became commonplace for the first time as a result of Newton's work. The universe was no longer viewed as a living entity with the Holy Spirit as its core, but as a machine, a mechanism that was understandable and predictable. A new view of God began to emerge—the clock-maker God who, having set the universe in motion, had left the scene and was no longer in constant relationship with it.

Butler's work, titled *Analogy of Religion Natural and Revealed to the Constitution and Course of Nature* but commonly known as the *Analogy*, was

considered a tour de force in his day. He undertook to show how the best scientific thinking of his day was not opposed at all to the theology of the church. Rather, he said, all of nature pointed toward the deeper revelation of God. He began by describing the butterfly that emerges from the cocoon transformed with a new and more glorious body as an analogy of what God intended for each of us—and the whole of creation—in the coming kingdom. Butler’s work became the talk of northern Europe, and for a while it was one of the most popular books in print.

But then scientific thought moved on. The French and German schools began to move beyond Newton’s mechanical models for the universe and toward a view based on the behavior of energy in all its various forms. Butler’s book was now having a conversation with a partner that was no longer speaking with it. Christianity, based on the full revelation of God in the person of Jesus, speaks of eternal truths that must be at the heart of all theological conversations no matter the era in which they occur. Science, however, is constantly moving forward, discarding older ideas that are no longer viewed as adequate explanations and taking

up new ones that promise to do a better job of explaining what is observed. It's not that the two conversation partners have a different language; they are each speaking in ways to which the other has trouble relating.

And yet we need to have the conversation. And so we struggle to hear each other's voice. There can be no reconciliation, which is the core of the church's mission, unless there is conversation. It has always seemed to me that learning to speak to each other, learning to understand how another person thinks, is both the key to empathy and compassion but also a primary gate to be entered as we come into the kingdom of God.



What conversations have you been neglecting because they are difficult to have?

Who in your life do you have trouble identifying with or understanding?

What can you do today to move a little closer to those persons, to take the conversation a few steps further along? Doing that is doing the work of reconciliation.

Friday after Ash Wednesday

Don't Make the Bible a Liar

Lead me in your truth, and teach me.

— Psalm 25:4

Most of the perceived conflict between science and religion is rooted in how we understand the role of the Bible in the church. For most of the church's history, the Bible was understood to be authoritative for Christians and worthy to be studied by all. But it was used as a conversation partner and not as a rule book.

This is seen very clearly in some of the writings of Saint Augustine of Hippo. Augustine's understanding of how we are justified by our faith and not by our works came from his deep study of Saint Paul's writings. But when it came to defending biblical accounts of creation against criticisms made by pagan philosophers, Augustine argued that it was a mistake to insist on the biblical account

as literal truth in all instances. To people who insisted that natural laws didn't apply, Augustine responded: "It is disgrace for a Christian to talk nonsense to a pagan about something the pagan knows about—because it causes them to doubt everything that is found in the books of the Bible." (He was specifically referencing the movement and relative sizes of the heavenly bodies.)

Augustine's point is that we when try to use the Bible's witness incorrectly, we damage the Bible's witness to the primary matters to which it testifies: the story of God's relationship with Israel, the coming of the Messiah, and the death and resurrection of Jesus. The way the books of the Bible were misused in Augustine's day is still happening in ours. The current misuse is a reaction to the ascendancy of the scientific method, specifically Darwin's work in natural selection as the origin of the diversity of life. There's a sense in some parts of the church that we can read the Bible the way we read a textbook, and that every single verse of the Bible has an eternal truth to teach. There's a differing model in other parts of the church that says the stories contained in the text—and, of course, the metastory that the entire

library of books tells as a whole—are the most important. There’s no one single model on how to read and understand the Bible, and that’s the root cause of much of the conflict within the church today.

So this Lent, as we begin to think about how the natural world testifies to the hand of God in creation, it’s important for us to take some time to think about how we each understand the Bible.



How do you understand the Bible?

Have you thought much about it?

Do you think all the various parts of the Bible are equally true?

Are there different kinds of truth?

Episcopal clergy testify at their ordination that they believe the Bible is the Word of God and contains all things necessary to salvation. What do you think that means?

Saturday after Ash Wednesday

The Limits of Logic

*You will know the truth,
and the truth will make you free.*

— John 8:32

One of the great mistakes people make is to believe that things that are true can be shown to be true by the use of deductive reasoning and logic. I think the roots of this belief come from the way we are educated as children, when we learn facts in a systematic way and arrange truths in a logical order. You can see this most clearly in the way we learn mathematics, particularly as students move from elementary school classes in arithmetic into junior high and high school courses in algebra and geometry. Teachers start with the basic axioms, things that we accept as true without needing proofs. We use those axioms to prove more complicated ideas, and then use those proofs to support more and more sophisticated conjectures.

The student is left with the idea that mathematics is a beautiful, organized ladder that starts with simple things and climbs up by use of logic and deduction to ever more complicated ideas.

The same idea underlies much of the physical sciences, given that they are, to the greatest extent possible, driven by theories that are logically derived and experimentally verified. Certainly the great triumphs of Kepler, Galileo, and Newton in mechanics and celestial movements start with the very simplest laws possible and then extend them to explain and accurately predict the intricate movements of the world.

A rather famous mathematician named Kurt Gödel threw a huge monkey wrench into the whole logical enterprise when he rigorously proved that there were things that were true that could not be proven true using logical deduction. (It's a bit more sophisticated than that, but basically that's his idea.) Gödel's incompleteness theorem means that logic won't get us to all truth. In fact it says that we can't even hope that it will get us to most truth. Logic is a powerful but limited tool. At least when we look at logic logically.

Many people of faith worry about not being able to logically prove or experimentally verify their beliefs. And there are certainly voices in the world around us for whom this inability is seen as a fatal flaw in the religious enterprise. But if we hold Gödel's idea before us, we can understand that this lack of logic isn't a fatal flaw; it just indicates that religious truth has to be handled with a different set of tools. The big question for us is to discover what those tools might be.

While you're pondering that, you might reflect on the spiritual significance of limitations. Logic is limited in its utility. God limits God's self in the act of Incarnation. You and I are taking on the spiritual discipline of limitations in the season of Lent. Sometimes the decision to limit our choices makes space for creativity to flourish and allows new ideas to emerge.



How do we know if a religious idea is true?

Is it because it's logically proven from the Bible?

Is it because the church has found it useful over time?

Is it because it makes you a better, more loving person?

How do we know our faith is true?

First Sunday in Lent

Cosmos

*O Lord and Ruler of the hosts of heaven...
You made the heavens and the earth,
with all their vast array.*

— *The Book of Common Prayer*, Cantic 14, p. 90

In this first week of Lent, I invite you to meditate with me on the largest structures of God's creation. Not the large things that we on Earth have seen or created, but structures that fill the sky and are fundamental to the organization of the universe and our own existence. I invite you to meditate with me on what we can learn by looking at the darkness of the night sky, the sameness of creation over vast distances, the meaning of time, and more.

On this first Sunday in Lent, as many of us begin our yearly pilgrimage in a formal way, I ask you to consider the scale of creation. Much of what I will present over the next weeks is organized by scale, beginning at the largest, the cosmic scale, and ending in the last days of Lent and Holy Week

at the smallest, the quantum scales. The greatest conundrum in my mind is that it is possible for us to use our imagination to conceive the cosmos.

The universe is essentially a giant empty, soundless, cold, chaotic void. In incredibly rare instances, there are small pockets of organized matter. The little pockets represent very simple things like electrons, a proton, a cosmic ray. Even more rarely those little bits of organization combine into something complicated—a hydrogen or helium atom. Even more rare than that are clouds of hydrogen. Stars, planets, and everything else that we can see are very small and very rare things when we think on the cosmic scale. It's hard to imagine that God fills all of this vastness with the fire of love, or that God can comprehend its totality.

And yet that is just what we insist on believing about God as Christians. And more than that, we believe that the same God who animates the vast cosmos knows each of us individually by name and loves us. And that God came into the cosmos at a specific moment in history here on the Earth, a nondescript rocky planet in orbit around a boringly typical and relatively small star.

It is when I think about the universe at the largest cosmic scales that I am most dumbfounded by what theologians call the “scandal of the particularity of the Incarnation.” We are so small and yet for some reason we matter so much to God. It is a thing nearly impossible to grasp. And yet it is central to the teaching of the prophets and the apostles.



Do you believe the God of the cosmos hears your prayer?

If you find yourself struggling with that, could you, at least for today, envision what would change in you if you believed that?