

Open Your Eyes to Mystery

Romans 16:25-27

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Back in early October, I was standing at one of the scenic overlooks along Skyline Drive in Shenandoah National Park. I was looking toward the east, over the Virginia Piedmont and hills covered with trees arrayed in the brilliant colors of fall. I turned to my friend Rob and said, "It didn't have to be this way. The leaves could have simply turned brown, fallen from the trees, and died. It didn't have to be colorful and beautiful."

Rob, who claims to be an atheist, said, "Are you saying God designed it this way?"

I responded: "No. I'm just saying it didn't have to be this way. But it is."

There was no argument from design in what I was saying. I wasn't even all that concerned with deities in the moment. Just beauty. Beauty is part of the mystery of the cosmos.

The week of Thanksgiving, astrophysicist Adam Frank, who describes himself as "an atheist with sympathies for the sacred character of human experience," wrote the following on an NPR blog:

We just find ourselves here. With our individual birth we just "wake-up" and discover ourselves in the midst of an extraordinary world of beauty and sorrow. All around us we see exquisite and exquisitely subtle orders played out effortlessly. From the lazy descent of fall leaves to the slow unfolding of cloudscapes in empty blue skies, it is all just here and we are just here to see it.

For me that is the mystery. No amount of explanation, be it a "Theory of Everything" or a religious theology, will reduce the power of its experience. The primitive quality of feeling, the presence of life and its luminosity, is the mystery and I am damn thankful for it.

As we prepared for this worship season, the deep space shots of the Hubble Space Telescope kept coming to mind. One image in particular that really resonated with our theme "Open Your Eyes" is of the Cat's Eye Nebula. That image appeared on the flyer announcing our Advent events. You can see a copy of it hanging on my office door downstairs.

It is an amazing swirl of light and fire in soft colors of pink, peach, violet, and various shades of blue. At the center is a bright dot and around it the gases swirl in clouds. Light radiates out in a series of circles. One almost imagines the eye of God looking down upon us.

I get lost in the wonder and majesty of such an image.

As we drove away from that particular scenic overlook on Skyline Drive, my friend Rob added to my sense of wonder about the fall foliage by saying that what got him is that we

human beings didn't have to be able to experience the color and the beauty. Our biological mechanisms didn't have to be attuned to perceive the color in the trees or to appreciate it as beautiful.

Consider again the Hubble image. It is clearly not a cosmological necessity that we humans be able to design an instrument that can take this photo and reveal this beauty. This beauty could have remained unseen in deep space for eternity. Surely there is wonder in that. It didn't have to be this way.

This week physicists working at the Large Hadron Collider announced that they are narrowing in on findings that, within a year, should confirm or deny the existence of the Higgs Particle. One physicist wrote that we "will have revealed the deepest layer of reality our species has ever probed." Through mathematics and scientific experimentation we will reach a fuller understanding of the world in which we live. It didn't have to be this way.

Theologian Mary Grey, in her book *Introducing Feminist Images of God*, writes, "the very inexhaustibility of [the divine] mystery admits the possibility of new imagery, new naming, fresh and startling experiences of the divine." Theologian Marcia Falk adds to this idea, an "authentic monotheism is not a singularity of image, but an embracing unity of multiplicity of many images." Grey calls this the "endless unfolding of God."

A few weeks ago in our Wednesday night spirituality group, we explored the seven divine names of Jesus found in the hymn "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," which we have already sung this morning. Look at that hymn again and the myriad beautiful images of God.

O Wisdom, you create the universe and hold all things together in a strong yet gentle manner. You become the very womb of God from which we are born again.

O Shoot of Jesse, taproot of grace and flower of holiness, you fulfill our dreams.

O Dayspring, splendor of eternal light and sun of justice, enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

O Emmanuel, God with us, Sovereign, Savior, and Good-News-Bringer. "The name for the one who is at one and the same time provision for the journey and the journey's destination."

In Oklahoma City, one of my congregants taught an adult ed class on the names of God. He gave all of us who attended a sixteen page handout of various divine names. He included various Hebrew names for God, various feminine images, those developed by philosophy and theology through the ages, the 99 names of God from the Qur'an, and various titles of Jesus in the New Testament. It is a long list, and I'm sure not exhaustive or complete. Among the favorites I marked in that handout: Homemaker, Pursuer, God of Endless Possibilities, Wellspring of the Joy of Living, Everlasting to Everlasting, Promise Keeper, The Tremendous, The Bountiful, and The Generous.

Rejoice, rejoice, that God comes to us in myriad ways. It didn't have to be this way.

But what if it did? What if this plurality of images, this ever-revealing mystery is the very essence of who God is? Mary Grey writes that God is always a "God of Surprises." She goes on

Surely that is the one aspect that we can be sure of in encountering God – namely, that we will be knocked off our feet, our breath taken away, our hearts burning within us, as the . . . mystery which both captivates and yet holds us in awe and wonder, meets us—

not on the holy mountain—but in the daily round of preparing food, caring for family, earning our living and paying attention to all our relationships.

Back in the summer when the staff met to begin our Advent planning, I posed Nikki's question to them, "How do we as contemporary, progressive people prepare for an encounter with God?" Stephen's immediate answer was "I'd get my suit cleaned."

Life is filled with surprises, with mysteries, with moments of wonder and beauty and joy. There is the cosmic and sublime, like the Hubble images. There is the natural beauty of the fall foliage. There are also the surprises in the midst of ordinary moments like a walk in the park, preparing food, caring for family, or earning our living. The novelist John Updike wrote, "The self's responsibility . . . is to achieve rapport if not rapture with the giant, cosmic other: to appreciate, let's say, the walk back from the mailbox."

This Advent and Christmas and New Year, Open Your Eyes to Mystery.