

“A Little Lower Than the Angels”

a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on June 11, 2017
based on Psalm 8

“There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.”
Leonard Cohen

Psalm 8 is a fabulous hymn, maybe the best in the Bible, and at bottom it’s about finding perspective. It’s about staying in touch with a perspective that ancient people were acutely aware of and which we moderns are not. I’m thinking of the line that begins, *When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established . . .*

The ancients looked at the moon and the stars every evening. Unlike us city dwellers, they were hardly ever in doors. Every evening they could see millions of stars, and it clearly had an effect on them that was two-edged. It reminded them, of course, of how small they were, and it also demonstrated to them how great, how majestic the creator must be.

The upshot? *What are human beings that you are mindful of them [O God, and] mortals that you care for them?*

It’s an interesting question. I’ve just returned from Cape Cod where my 28 year old daughter lives. She will be delivering a child, a little girl, in October, by the grace of God. That makes me particularly mindful of a ritual she and I shared when she was very small. Every evening before bed-time I would carry her outside to look at the night sky. As the psalmist says, we’d look at the moon and the stars. And we would always find Orion’s belt: those three bright stars perfectly spaced, always visible in the early evening.

They’ve been called the three kings or the three sisters, but my daughter called them “our three friends.” It made the universe a little less large and little more friendly, a little bit predictable. It was a huge sky full of stars, but we could count on them to be there, twinkly down on us every time.

It’s a fascinating relationship, the relationship of human beings and the stars.

You know, it takes four years for light from the nearest star, Sirrus, to reach us. It takes centuries for light from Orion to reach the earth. That thought just makes the relationship my daughter and I struck up with those stars all the more charming; forging a bond of sorts with all that light we saw that is so much older than we are, and that is still traveling on now and will continue on after we both are gone from this earth, and her daughter, too.

Now, you can look at that fact two ways. You can say, “What’s the point of anything?” or you can say, “What a miracle it is to even behold such a thing.”

How remarkable to be a creature who can imagine striking up a relationship with pure unadulterated light.

The psalmist acknowledges those two choices and chooses to go with the miracle, and so do I.

Okay, I want us to stay reflective, to hold the worshipful stance the psalmist held in the psalm, and focus on the business we are about right now, this minute; the business of going to church, because I believe worship is primarily about looking at those two choices every week and deciding again to entertain the miracle.

Friday morning I came across an essay in the current *Los Angeles Review of Books*, by a screenwriter from LA, on why she goes to church every week. Her name is Dorothy Fortenberry. Dorothy is one of the writers working on *The Handmaid's Tale* series for Hulu. Her essay is called, *Half-Full of Grace*. She begins her essay with an exchange with her small daughter.

"You don't have to like it. You just have to go," I tell my five-year-old kid every Sunday when she complains about going to church. Every Sunday, even though she would prefer to stare at my smartphone, I make her go anyway. Even though my smartphone is extremely wonderful.

Even though our religion — like all religions — has been responsible for terrible things.

Even though I often find the whole thing nutty and tacky, like a theme restaurant or the kind of museum you visit on a road trip.

Even though, when I was a kid and was similarly dragged by my mom, I was convinced — convinced — that I would never go again of my own free will. Every Sunday, we go.

This is my attempt to explain why.

Being a screenwriter in Los Angeles is like being on a perpetual second date with everyone you know. You strive to be your most charming, delightful, quirky-but-not-damaged self because you never know what will come of the encounter.

Maybe it's just a coffee. Maybe it's the coffee that leads to a job. Maybe it's the job that leads to a series. So, you wear flattering jeans and an expensive, casual shirt, and you smile.

But being on a perpetual second date can get exhausting. Constantly feeling that you should be meeting people, impressing people, shocking people (just the right amount) is a strange way to live your life. And one of the reasons that I go to church is that church is the opposite of that.

I do not impress anyone at church. I do not say anything surprising or charming. I am not special at church, and this is the point.

Because (according to the ridiculous, generous, imperfectly applied rules of my religion) we are all equally beloved children of God. We are all exactly the same amount of special.

The things that I feel proud of can't help me here, and the things that I feel embarrassed by are beside the point. I'm a person but, for 60 minutes, I'm not a personality.

I have come with no particular agenda. I have not come to teach or volunteer or try a new cuisine or inhabit a new neighborhood. I have not even come to act as an "ally." I have come to sit next to people, well aware of all we don't have in common, and face together in the same direction.

Halfway through church, I turn to the congregants next to me and share the peace. I wish that they experience peace in their lives. That's it. They wish the same for me. Our words are identical. Our need for peace is infinite.

Church is a group of broken individuals united only by our brokenness traveling together to ask to be fixed. It's like a subway car. It's like the DMV. It's like The Wizard of Oz: we are each missing something, and there is a man in a flowing robe whom we trust to hand that something over.

*(And I know I know — that the problem with this metaphor is that, in The Wizard of Oz, there **wasn't** actually anyone with magical powers behind the curtain. I get it.)*

But church is not just about how I feel or whom I'm surrounded by. It's about faith. This part is harder for me to explain. (Dorothy is Catholic)

Whether I actually believe all the stuff about Jesus and Mary and Light from Light, true God from true God varies. Most of the time, I do, I think. Sometimes I don't.

The single most annoying thing a nonreligious person can say, in my opinion, isn't that religion is oppressive or that religious people are brainwashed. It's the kind, patronizing way that nonreligious people have of saying, "You know, sometimes I wish I were religious. I wish I could have that certainty. It just seems so comforting never to doubt things."

Well, sometimes I wish I had the certainty of an atheist. I wish I could be positive that there was no God and that Sundays were for brunch.

That dead people stayed dead and prayer was useless and Jesus was nothing more than a really great teacher.

But I believe too much, at least sometimes, to be certain about that. Sometimes I feel like I believe almost everything the church teaches and sometimes I feel like I believe almost nothing, but if I'm anywhere from one to 99 percent on the belief scale, my response is the same. If it's more than zero, I should go to church.

I do not find religion to be comforting in the way that I think nonreligious people mean it. I do not believe that everything in my life will necessarily be all right and I certainly do not believe that everything happens for a reason.

It is not comforting to know quite as much as I do about how weaselly and weak-willed I am when it comes to being as generous as Jesus demands. Thanks to church, I have a much stronger sense of the sort of person I would like to be, and I am forced to confront all the ways in which I fail, daily. Nothing promotes self-awareness like turning down an opportunity to bring children to visit their incarcerated parents. Or avoiding shifts at the food bank.

Thanks to church, I have looked deeply into my own heart and found it to be of merely small-to-medium size. None of this is particularly comforting.

Which is not to say there aren't parts of church that are comforting. It is comforting, for instance, to sing songs in a group. Singing alongside other people is a basic human pleasure that extends back across time and culture, and it's a shame to me that many adult Americans only experience it before baseball games. The songs that we sing in church are many of the same post-Vatican II songs I grew up singing. They sound like they should be on Sesame Street circa 1970, and I unabashedly adore them.

It is comforting to pray. Even without full knowledge or understanding of how the prayer will be received, it is comforting to offer up one's wishes for the world. In a time of stress and anxiety and distrust, it is comforting to be direct about what a possible alternative would look like.

Someone leads the prayers every week at church and the kinds of things we pray for are both straightforward (an end to the death penalty; a living wage for all workers; safe homes for refugees; care for the planet and its climate) and very difficult to achieve, which makes them ideal subjects for prayer.

When I think about any of these things outside of church, my blood pressure skyrockets and I go into a mild panic attack. When I pray about them in church, I feel like I am doing a tiny bit to help.

Thought about with even a smidgen of rationality, prayer makes no sense.

*If you asked me point blank what I believe about how God picks and chooses among petitions ranging from new sneakers to the stopping of genocide, I would stammer incoherently. I would tell you, I suppose, that God has some sort of triage system that I can't figure out, but also that anyone who wants to, **should** pray for anything they want — why not?*

It seems presumptuous to self-censor our prayers for fear they are not worthy of His time. If anyone is able to structure His time efficiently, it ought to be God.

Church isn't an escape from the world. It's a continuation of it. My family and I don't go to church to deny the existence of the darkness. We go to look so hard at the light that our eyes water.

So, that takes us back to where we started -- with the psalmist's dilemma: to look at the vastness of the night sky and say, "What's the point?" or, look at the totally delicious light of the moon and the stars and say, "How great it is to be alive and to be a tiny participant in such a wonderful holy mystery."

To consider what an honor it is to be here. As we said here together over and over during advent last year, quoting St. Irenaeus, "The glory of God" isn't just the moon and the stars, "It's a human being fully alive."

I want to close with a meditation that invites us to entertain the idea that this business of being alive and sentient is a complete miracle. The meditation comes from the first part of a two-part poem by Kay Ryan, called *Pinhole*.

So indulge me for a moment and close your eyes and imagine a star in the night sky, a bright one. Now, let me invite you to think of that star as a pinhole of light as I read this; just a pinhole of light breaking into the vast empty dark.

The poem poses the question this morning's psalm posed – Why consider that the universe is a holy mystery? And it answers it in 8 bite size parts:

1.
Because you can only sit in the dark for so long, until the sky opens up again.
2.
Because it is time to wake up.
3.
Because a wound heals eventually.

4.

Because a scar means surviving.

5.

Because another story can begin even if the other hasn't reached its end yet.

6.

Because I am here. Because you are here.

7.

Because the world turns.

8.

Because there is a crack in everything.

Amen.