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Epiphany
The Fullness of Time

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As the story goes, human beings came into the world, then they messed things up. I told part of that story last week. It starts in Genesis with Adam and Eve, but they couldn't get it right. Then God sent Noah, but he couldn't get it right either. Then God sent Abraham, and from him came a people, but they lost their way and wound up in slavery in Egypt. So, God sent Moses to rescue them, but even still, they got it wrong in the wilderness. In fact, even Moses fell short of the goal and couldn't inherit the promise. So, God sent Judges and Kings, but the Judges trusted imperfectly and the Kings looked out for themselves rather than for the people. So, God sent prophets as a warning, but the warning wasn't heeded and the people went astray. They were taken into exile – eventually some returned, but most didn't. Finally, when He had run out of all other options, God took it upon himself to go down and rescue the people. He sent Jesus, his Son, true God from God, because it was his last best option. Almost like a cosmic Hail Mary. God says, "Nothing else has worked so far – maybe this will do the trick." And guess what? It did! And that's the story of redemption history.

And it's a pretty good story, right? The broad contours of that story are accurate to the church's understanding of salvation. There is indeed a brokenness within our lives that Christ alone can fix. But what about that last bit? This idea that Jesus was nothing more than God's last option, as if we somehow forced his hand. Do we really have that kind of power over God? Or could it be instead that our reconciliation to God is part of something bigger? A greater plan. Could it be that in our salvation, God is up to something which has cosmic implications? Something like a plan for the fullness of time?

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to take the high school youth on a mission trip to Arizona. It was awesome – in the literal sense. And while we were there, we took a day trip to see the Grand Canyon. And if you've ever been there, you can no doubt remember the immense scale of the place. Pictures don't do it justice. When you're standing at the edge of this great chasm, you feel incredibly small. You feel small because you *are* small. It's almost as if the Canyon could swallow you up at any moment.

But perhaps even more incredible than the size of the place is its age. The youngest parts of the Grand Canyon itself are around 5 or 6 million years old. The oldest sections are upwards of 70 million years old. And the rocks exposed at the bottom of the canyon have been dated to be nearly 2 billion years old.^a Written human history only really spans 5,000 years.^b An almost insignificant amount of time when compared to the age of the places we, as a species inhabit.

^a [How old is the Grand Canyon? | The Real Age of the Grand Canyon](#)

^b [History of writing - Wikipedia](#)

And what of the places we don't inhabit? What about the vast universe with its unknown and uncountable multitudes of stars and galaxies, stretching to infinity in every direction? Billions and Billions, as Carl Sagan used to say. Quantities of time and space at a scale which our feeble minds cannot begin to comprehend. The Psalmist wonders,

³ *When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,*

⁴ *what is man that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care for him?^c*

It makes you wonder, doesn't it? What is the point of it all? Why do human beings matter in the grand scheme of things? Why does God concern himself with us at all? When I wake up in the morning, does God care? Does God care whether I'm kind to my wife or attentive to my children? Does God care, in the scope of all of time, whether I have any regard for the needs of my neighbors or contribute to the common good? Why do anything of worth if it's all just a drop of water in the incomprehensible ocean of God's creation?

And yet, for some reason, I'm here. And for some reason, there are other people here too. People who mean something to me. People I feel inclined to love. People who, for whatever reason, love me in return. For some reason, God cares, I think, that I get out of bed and eat my bowl of cereal. It really feels like it matters to God, doesn't it? But why? What is the reason?

Well, maybe one possibility is that God wants me to keep the law like Jesus did. Maybe He put me here to be a good person so that one day, when I die, I can go to heaven and be with Jesus. After all, our text for this morning says that we should "be holy and blameless before him." What better reason to be good than to hopefully gain that heavenly crown? But then, when you really think about it, you wonder if that isn't just veiled selfishness. Being good for the hope of heaven – it's really just about me, isn't it? As if all of creation is nothing more than a proving ground for me to demonstrate my worthiness to him.

Or maybe there's another possibility. Maybe the reason God put me on this earth is to kick back and relax. I don't have to do anything at all because God is gracious and he predestined me for glory. That famous presbyterian word is right there in verse 11: I've been "predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will." I'm elect and that's all that really matters. Not so sure about you, but that's ok, because I'm all set. God set all the stars and planets into motion because one day he knew that he wanted to create me, his most favorite creature. And he wanted me especially to enjoy the blessings of life on earth before he took me up to heaven. But what about Jesus, you ask? Oh yeah, I forgot about him. I guess, maybe that's not it either.

Well, then, what is it? What is the purpose of it all? Why did God put me here? What does it matter?

Philip Yancey wrote an article for Christianity Today that tells the story of a great debate that occurred around 700 years ago between a Scottish theologian named Duns Scotus and the great theologian, Thomas Aquinas. And the debate focused on the purpose of the incarnation. Aquinas suggested that the incarnation of Jesus Christ was for the sole purpose of rescuing

^c Psalm 8:3-4

fallen humanity. In other words, Jesus was God’s response to the brokenness of human beings. And in a limited sense, he’s right, of course. That is indeed one truth of the Gospel. But is it truly the fullness of the Gospel? Duns Scotus thought it was bigger than that. Yancey says,

“To [Duns Scotus], the Word becoming flesh, as described in the prologue to John’s gospel, must surely represent the Creator’s primary design—God’s original goal—and not a plan B... Duns Scotus and his school suggested the Incarnation was God’s underlying motive for Creation, not merely a correction to it. God spun off this vast and beautiful universe for the singular purpose of sharing the divine life and love with humanity, intending all along for us to participate in eternal fellowship with him.”^d

And you know what, Duns Scotus is absolutely right. In Ephesians, Paul says,

“he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.”

Paul says that God’s purpose was,

set forth in Christ ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.

Friends, there is something more to all of this that we see. The world which God created did have a purpose. It does have a purpose. And that purpose is Jesus Christ. He is the focal point of all creation, the hinge of all that came before and all that comes after. Elsewhere, Paul says,

“By him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”^e

Which means, of course, that Jesus is the point and purpose of the universe. He is the everlasting one. He is the goal from Genesis to Revelation. “I am the alpha and the omega,” says the Lord. “The first and the Last, the beginning and the end.”^f But does that mean also that you and I are not important? In Christ, God’s plan of salvation encompasses all things... Paul says God intends to “unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.” Yes, that includes us, but it includes more than us too. And that’s very good news. In fact, It’s the best news we could ever hope to hear!

Daniel Migliore, one of my favorite theologians says, “You and I are not necessary.”^g God is perfectly content in the eternal communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God’s got everything that he needs already. Why, then, did he create us? Very simply – because he wanted to. This God, in whom we live and move and have our being, wants us as part of his good creation. Paul says, we have been adopted through Christ as Sons of God. God didn’t have to choose us, but He did! And through him, we’ve received an inheritance. All that is His has become ours through his Son. He wanted us from before the foundation of the earth, and he

^d [Christmas Was Always God’s Plan - Christianity Today](#)

^e Colossians 1:16-17

^f Revelation 22:13

^g Daniel Migliore - Faith Seeking Understanding

wants us still. He loves us, which is why he always, always, always, intended to send his Son to save us. Jesus Christ: not plan B, but plan A.

But our salvation is not for ourselves alone. Remember, His plan may start with us, but it is bigger than us. We've got an important role to play. He's got a job for us to do. We were created in God's image, after all. Which means that he intends for us to show to the world what He is like. We might say, "that's a big task." And we would be right. In fact, it is an impossible task. How, then, are we to do it?

Robert sent me this funny meme last week. And I thought about describing it to you, but jokes are never funny if you have to explain them. But the gist of the joke is that the apostle Paul is really good at writing run-on sentences. He's the best there ever was. In fact, our entire reading for this morning is just one sentence.^h Our translation does us some favors by breaking it up into manageable pieces, but if you look at your bible, you'll see that there's an interesting grammatical problem that the translator has to solve. It happens at the end of verse 4 with the Greek phrase, "*en agape*" or "*in love*." Where does that phrase belong? Is it at the end of verse four or the beginning of verse five? Is the text trying to say that we should be holy and blameless before him in love? Or should we read it as, "In love he predestined us for adoption to himself." In other words, is it we who love or is it God?

Well, what if it's both? "He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him in love...[Because] In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ." In both cases, it is God who chooses. In love, he chooses us, and our love is born out of his gracious, loving choice. His love enables our love. That's how the impossible becomes possible. We love because God first loved us. That's where the rubber meets the road for our question. Because our creator has chosen to love us perfectly in his Son, he makes us want to love in return. Our lives have a purpose – and that purpose is to rest in his love so that we can show his great love to the world. Paul says, for, "he *chose* us... he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him *in love*."

One preacher tells the story of his memories on the playground in elementary school. He says that it was always the case that when the captains were choosing teams for kickball, he was always chosen last. And the pain that came from being chosen last was deep, and all that pain made him bitter. It changed him. Maybe you know that feeling. But what would his heart look like if he had been chosen first? What if he was chosen first regardless of how good he was at kickball? How would that have changed him? Friends, that's how it is with God. Because in Christ, you and I are always chosen first.ⁱ Thanks be to God.

^h [Commentary on Ephesians 1:3-14 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#)

ⁱ [Same Old Song: Christmas 2/Epiphany \(A\): Breaking News: God's Grace for All!](#)