

“Paradox One: The Creator of the Universe Knows Us by Name”

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Based upon Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 8

On Epiphany, we recognized among other things, that Jesus was God with us, and that means that he was fully human and fully divine simultaneously. I ended the sermon by noting that Jesus’ divinity often challenges us because his perspective was and is so different from our own. “You have to lose your life to gain it,” Jesus said. “You have to become like the least to be the greatest.” Christians have struggled for centuries to understand and embrace contradictions like these because they are not only countercultural, but also counterintuitive in many cases. How can it be that “the poor are rich, the weak are strong, the foolish ones are wise,” as the lyrics to *O for a World* proclaims? Many, especially in recent years, have abandoned the faith altogether because they are unwilling or unable to embrace such seemingly contradictory teachings. Recognizing this, author and theologian Parker Palmer, in his book *The Promise of Paradox*, has observed, “the way we respond to contradiction is pivotal to our spiritual lives. The moments when we meet and reckon with contradictions are turning points where we either enter or evade the mystery of God.”¹

Well, I can’t guarantee that if you listen to me preach you will move effortlessly one step closer into the mystery of God, or that I can explain away the contradictions which are explicitly and implicitly a part of the Christian faith. But given how important for our spiritual lives it is for us to “reckon with” them, I have decided to begin this year by doing a sermon series on some of the biggest Christian paradoxes. My hope is that by inviting us all to chew on some of the great contradictions Jesus taught or embodied, we will, at the very least, grow more comfortable with the idea of paradoxical truth, and in so doing, feel less anxious about our spiritual doubts and questions. If we end up moving more easily into the mystery of God because of pondering these things, then so much the better.

The first contradiction we’re going to consider is one that Anglican priest and theoretical physicist, John Polkinghorne, calls the “scandalous particularity of the incarnation.”² Christians affirm that God is our omnipotent creator, maker of the whole universe. We also affirm that this huge and powerful God who lives outside of time and space, loves humanity so much that God takes the time to know us individually, and is also actively involved in our lives saving, guiding, and comforting us. Both of today’s Scripture lessons capture this paradox of God’s awesomeness and intimacy beautifully.

“But now thus says the Lord,” Isaiah prophesied, “he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you walk through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned and the flame shall not

¹ Palmer, Parker J., *The Promise of Paradox: A Celebration of Contradictions in the Christian Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1980), 5 (citing Thomas Merton’s theology).

² Polkinghorne, John, *Science and The Trinity: The Christian Encounter with Reality* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2004), 171.

consume you, for I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.” “Second” Isaiah offered these words to the people of Israel when they were in exile in Babylon at the end of the 6th Century B.C.E. He wanted them to know that like their ancient ancestors, whom God enabled to pass safely through the Red Sea, and to whom God appeared as a harmless pillar of fire and a burning bush, God was going to be with them and lead them safely out of exile and into new life. Ever since then, Isaiah’s words have offered comfort to Israel’s descendants in a whole host of other settings, and in spiritual and emotional exiles as well as physical ones. The God who created us cares for us and knows our names, the text assures us. The God, who for mysterious and frustrating reasons does not spare us experiencing floods and fires, nevertheless stays with us in the midst of them, and ultimately saves our souls despite them. Christians still believe these words, not just because Isaiah said them, but because Jesus Christ confirmed them with his life. God is here with us in suffering, leading us into freedom and new life in this life and/or the next.

In *Psalms 8*, the Psalmist echoes many of the same ideas Isaiah expressed. But he also highlights more expressly the challenge that comes from affirming an intimately present God who also made our immense universe. “O Lord our Sovereign,” the song writer begins, “when I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor.” Who among us has never felt small after gazing up at a starry sky? Who among us, when confronted with the fact that our universe is either incomprehensibly huge and ever-expanding, or truly infinite, containing billions and billions of galaxies, each containing billions and billions of stars, hasn’t wondered how a God who made all of that could possibly know us, let alone love us, weep when we weep, and rejoice when we rejoice?

It’s hard enough for us to wrap our minds around how anyone could possibly know 7.7 billion people well. But when you drop our world’s total population into the colossal sea of our universe, then all of us together become, in the words of one commentator, about the equivalent in size of “a quark in the nucleus of one atom of pocket lint,”³ and individually, we are 7 billion times still smaller than that! Why would God even notice us, let alone care enough about us to come in Christ and walk with us? Our faith tradition sees no contradiction in affirming the creator of the universe knows and loves us. But that doesn’t mean that we don’t. So, if we don’t want to be Deists, who see God as a distant clockmaker who started the Big Bang but isn’t involved in our lives personally, or Creationists, who accept God as Creator and Christ as savior, but reject all we know of the universe from science, then what do we do? How do we deal with the tension these two affirmations create?

According to Parker Palmer, if we want to accept the truths of the Christian faith, the first thing we need to do is overcome our fear of that tension. If statements contradict, Palmer argues, we get stressed out and filled with doubt because we tend to think that one or the other of them must be false. But if the statements are paradoxical, they both can be still be true. “A paradox is a

³ “*Big History*,” sermon on Psalm 8 from HOMILETICSONLINE, posted May 30, 2010, retrieved Jan. 7, 2019 from <http://www.homileticsonline.com>.

seeming contradiction that when investigated can prove to be true.” Paradoxes exist because, as Nobel Prize winning physicist Neils Bohr put it, “The opposite of a correct statement is a false statement. But the opposite of a profound truth may be another profound truth.”⁴

Bohr should have known because physicists have had to struggle with paradoxes for years. For example, light, as I said on Epiphany, is both a particle and a wave. That doesn’t make any logical sense, but it is demonstrably true. Likewise, matter is organized according to calculable laws in the visible universe, but is governed by probabilities and unpredictability on the quantum level. As impossible as that sounds, we know this is true because scientists have observed and experienced these realities. They have calculated the beautiful math of the visible universe, tracked the forces of mass and acceleration and gravity, and seen how they interact together on matter. But physicists have also seen that subatomic particles are real, and that the quantum world is not bound by the same laws. In the subatomic world, just looking at a particle actually makes a difference in how it behaves. In the quantum world, subatomic particles are mostly unpredictable, yet they are also so connected with one another that you can shoot them to opposite sides of the universe and they will still spin in sync with each other. Basically, it’s all chaos and weirdness—nothing like the orderly universe we know.

This reality has stressed out physicists for decades. Einstein, whose equations are so famous, was not pleased at all with the chaos of quantum physics and called the interaction of particles across distance “spooky.” Stephen Hawking spent the better part of his life looking for some kind of grand unifying theory which could reconcile the differences between cosmology and quantum mechanics and eliminate the irrationality of it all. But their discomfort notwithstanding, physicists have had to live with the paradox of unpredictable, chaos creating predictable order in the universe long enough now that no one would seriously argue that either macro physics or quantum mechanics was untrue. The way that matter and energy work is a paradox woven into creation itself.

Because he is a physicist as well as a priest, John Polkinghorne sees the paradoxes of our faith in the same way. He doesn’t reject apparent logical contradictions, he investigates them. Having done this with the universe, he has can now provide seven persuasive reasons why our current scientific understanding of the universe actually makes more sense, not less, when viewed from a Trinitarian perspective.⁵ There is no question in Polkinghorne’s mind that based upon both science and Scripture, God is the creator of our vast and complicated universe. But there also is no question in his mind that God is truly with us in Christ in an intimate way because his investigation of the biblical record, as well as the existence of the testimonies of millions of Christians who have lived and experienced God since the Bible was canonized, affirms this truth. The testimony of believers must not be discounted, Polkinghorne argues, simply because it is subjective. It is experiential data.

⁴ Palmer, Paradox, at xxix.

⁵ Polkinghorne, Science and the Trinity, 60-87.

“How God can be known must be determined from first to last by the way in which [God] is actually known,” Polkinghorne explains. “It is the Christian testimony that God is most fully to be known in meeting with the One God whose triune reality is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Of course, this way of thinking is counterintuitive, just as so much of quantum theory is counterintuitive, but, just as in the case of quantum mechanics, that novel pattern of thought is forced upon us by the reality encountered, and it does not arise from fanciful or unconstrained speculation.”⁶ In other words, Christians affirm that God is with us because that is our experience of God, however counterintuitive the affirmation may seem. We have felt God strengthening us. We have heard God calling us. We have experienced God in innumerable ways, some of which we can explain, and some not. But our doctrine flows from our experience, not the other way around. So, we can no more reject God as Creator, or reject God in Christ, than physicists can reject one of the two domains of physics. The data would contradict us if we did.

I find Polkinghorne’s scientific way of looking at faith and paradox very persuasive. But I also know that it’s very heady stuff, so let’s think about the problem with our hearts too for a minute. When we feel that the universe is too huge for God to care about us, sometimes it’s not really a conflict between science and faith which is troubling us, or even the difficult problem of how a loving God allows human suffering. Often times when we are filled with doubts about God’s involvement in our lives, what we are really questioning is our nature more than God’s. “Are we valuable?” we wonder. “Do we make a difference? Are we all alone? Will anyone even notice when we’re gone?” When we feel this way, the biblical witness surpasses science for giving us assurances. *Genesis* affirms that the reason God loves us is that we were made in the image of God. *Exodus* teaches that God hears our complaints and works to set us free. The gospels proclaim that God loves and forgives us even when we are unworthy, and the Pauline letters assure us that we all have gifts to make a difference. Again and again, the Bible witness testifies to both God’s presence and our value. It assures us that we are never alone, never beyond redeeming, never too young or old, broken, or unfaithful to be lovable or beyond useful to God. Scripture records the experience of millions of different kinds of people over thousands of years who have been confronted with the awesome truth that God is with us, loving and saving us. Jesus Christ is the ultimate proof of that. So it isn’t irrational to believe these things even when the universe or our lives make us question our significance. The persistence of the Gospel is not a sign of the greatest mass delusion of all time. There’s too much evidence to the contrary. We may never understand how God can know us, or why God does not spare us suffering, but the lack of satisfying answers to those questions does not invalidate the truth of the assertion that God is with us, and always will be.

What do you think about when you look at the stars? What do you feel when flood waters lap at your feet or flames scorch your sides? We all have times when we are overwhelmed by the vastness of the universe, and times when it fills us with awe and wonder. We all also have times when we feel as if God doesn’t care and times when we are sure that God does. This is the nature of faith, sometimes it is strong and sometimes it is weak. But the gift of the particular paradox we are considering today, at least for me, is that when we embrace both of its truths, we

⁶ Polkinghorne, *Science and the Trinity*, 77, quoting Thomas Torrance.

find both hope and help. Hope comes from the knowledge that God has the ability to bring order out of chaos and knows our needs. Help comes when we realize that we cannot possibly know everything or control God, and therefore open ourselves to God for wisdom and guidance.

Parker Palmer summarizes the good news of Christian paradoxes this way. He writes, “Spiritual truth often seems self-contradictory when judged by conventional logic... Logic assumes that whatever violates the rules of rationality cannot possibly be true. Spirituality assumes that the deeper our questions go, the less useful those rules become. The spiritual life—whose territory is the nonrational, not the irrational—proceeds with a trembling confidence that God’s truth is too large for the simplicity of either-or. It can be apprehended only by the complexity of both-and.”⁷ Thanks be to God for being *both* the maker of our grand and mysterious universe, *and* the one who made us, claimed us, and in Christ, redeemed us with love. Amen.