A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

***“A Love Story”***

John 12:20-33

March 18, 2018

A long time ago, I was living in south Florida and blissfully engaged to a delightful and stunningly beautiful girl who was living in Texas. Separated by 2000 miles in the 1990s meant actual letter writing, dialing up for email a couple of times a day, and increasingly astronomically high phone bills.

We decided that it would be fun to read some books together, as a way to nurture our feeling of connectedness across the miles. She went first and picked, I don’t even rightly remember, *Sense and Sensibility*, or Mr. Darcy, or *Pride and Prejudice*, or some British Victorian romantic story. So I’m sitting in south Florida after working construction all day, by myself, dutifully reading this story of ladies sitting in parlors waiting for shy gentlemen to propose a meeting. The planned phone call comes for us to discuss it. We did and I’m sure it was wonderful and insightful.

Then it was my turn.

I picked Stephen Hawking’s *Brief History of Time*, which was the most well known popular book on science, physics, astronomy, and the big, galactic universe out there. I really enjoyed the book. The way he described the universe seemed to open up theological light, a God who created all of this from nothing. After his death this past week, one noted theologian reflected, “There is sadness at his death, admiration for a remarkable life story, admiration for his remarkable works of science, and a thankfulness for some of the things he discovered about the universe.” Hawking “pointed theologians towards a God with the universe in the palm of his hand . . . He demolished smaller gods, and left us with the bigger, biblical God.” (<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2018/16-march/news/uk/stephen-hawking-pointed-theologians-towards-a-god-with-the-universe-in-the-palm-of-his-hand>) I was totally enjoying this. I’m reading this really interesting work on astrophysics and cosmology and life. And a delightful and stunningly beautiful girl, living in Texas, is reading it with me.

But she wasn’t. Oh no, she never did read that book, my book. And I’m not bitter about this. Not even a little bit. Even after I dutifully read Pride and Sense and Sensibility and Prejudice. And to this day, she never has. And so today, with the passing of Professor Hawking, I would like to correct this old injustice, by remembering the story of the bigger, biblical God with the universe in the palm of his hand. It’s a story of life and death.

The wisdom of the vast universe is true all the way through. “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” Jesus is drawing on mysterious wisdom that is true for grains of wheat in the soil, and the stars in space, and the Messiah on the cross. It is through death that we have life.

For that wheat to grow, a seed is buried in the soil. In Jesus’ day, just as today, farmers plant one seed at a time. The grain lies in the bosom of the earth gathering moisture and nutrients until one day it sends tiny root hairs down into the soil and then shoots a stem upward toward the surface. The seed dies to itself, and from its death comes new life. What’s remarkable is how much new life. A farmer reports he plants two bushel of seed per acre, and harvests 40-50 bushels. Two bushels of seed on one acre produces enough grain for about 2500 loaves of bread.

The common wisdom of agriculture is also the deep wisdom of the universe: there must be death for there to be new life. Astrophysicists like Stephen Hawking have shown us that this death and life cycle is woven into the fabric of all that is. Honey, listen up. This is good stuff. The most massive, brilliant, brightest stars are born, they live, and they die. Our most powerful telescopes take snapshots of various stars way out there in the stages of their lives -- birth, life, even death.

When a massive star dies, its dies spectacularly. The energy compresses on itself and then it explodes, sending the elements, its helium, iron, carbon, phosphorus formed in its nuclear reactor, its stardust in every direction. Scientists tell us a story beyond our wildest imaginations. From the radiating explosion, pockets of the dust then begin to form, swirling, drawing into one another by gravity. The heat in this dust cloud rises, the forces increase, elements slam into one another. And a new star is born. And sometimes, from the leftover debris, in the cloud of dust, little balls of material are formed. Planets. A little ball of wonderful stardust material is this earth, which as far as we know right now, is the only one of its kind that is as beautiful and is the home of life. Everything that is, everything we know. Everything we’re made of. Carbon, hydrogen, helium, iron, nitrogen. The stuff that life is made of is brought to life from the death of stars. We’re all made of stardust.

That’s why we were supposed to read this book twenty years ago, dear. That’s what I was trying to tell you. We are made of the same stuff, see. We’re one. You and I. We’re each a collection of atoms from exploding stars dispersed into the universe, and reunited when we found one another. It’s not dry science. It’s a love story of our connection in the universe. All of this . . .all of this life, all of creation, all that God has done in Creation is a love story from the moment God said let there be light. You are a miracle of cosmic proportions. It’s a love story far grander than a maiden sitting straight-back in her parlor sipping tea, waiting anxiously for whether her mother will admit her gentlemen caller from that downtrodden estate.

From nothing God created all that is, the stars and planets, grains of wheat, and you and I. And we’re bound together by the unity of all that is, not only the matter, but also the story. As different as we are from one another, we’re all made of the same stuff. The entire creation of the universe is a love story of creation and recreation, life and death, and new life. The star dying and exploding becomes the material for another to be born. The seed, dying to itself, becomes the harvest of the bread of life. The Messiah, laying down his life, becomes the first fruit of new creation.

This is the love story of love stories. The God of the universe, God who is love, who spun the whirling planets, entered the creation, took its nitrogen, phosphorous, and carbon, its appetites and loves, its bones and blood, its language and friendships, its hates and hurts, its wounds and suffering, its betrayals, its cross, and its death. It wasn’t easy; even God made flesh.

Yet John’s gospel opens with language that sounds anything but death-like, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.”

Even though John will amaze us by announcing that the same Word took flesh and walked among us, this does not sound like a story that will end in suffering or death. John’s gospel is notable for this characteristic. In John, Jesus almost, it seems, floats a foot above the earth. He’s human sure, but it’s not like the other gospels. Mark begins in the wilderness. Luke begins with a swaddled baby. Matthew begins with a genealogy. John begins way up in the cosmos, a Word creating and ordering creation. If he’s walking among us, he’s gliding. Nothing bothers him. He always has the answer to every question, even if sometimes his answer is so esoteric that normal people can’t make sense of it. What do you mean, you must be born again? How is that even possible?

Jesus is almost like he’s coated in Teflon. Midnight theological challenges from Pharisees don’t bother him. If there’s water in the way, walk on it; if there’s thousands of hungry people, break some bread and feed them; if your mother nags you to fix the problem at the wedding, sigh, and turn the water into the very best wine they ever had. Nothing rattles him: a troubled woman alone at a well, I am the living water; a woman caught in adultery, let he who is without sin cast the first stone. Blind people are given sight; lame people are able to walk. Jesus doesn’t break a sweat. This is what John’s gospel is known for: how Jesus seems human, but also a little otherworldly, a little not quite like the rest of us. It’s the wellspring of some of those gnostic heresies that say that Jesus was human but not really, he was one of us, but not exactly. Jesus died on a cross, but did he really? Did he really experience pain? John’s gospel is at the heart of a lot of that that came later.

But we’ve misread John’s gospel if that’s where we end up. If it seems, especially at first, that Jesus wasn’t really affected by much of the problems in life that cause us trouble, the death he faced shook him to his core, to his soul. Only in John’s gospel is Jesus described with the word “tarasso.” It is usually translated “troubled.” Literally, it means to be shaken as if there were an earthquake in your soul. And there’s nothing more decidedly human than this, especially when we are confronted with death. Death and life may be the creative pattern of the universe and of agriculture, but when it’s death, even your own death, the one you will experience, it’s different, even for Jesus, even for Jesus in the gospel of John.

For the first ten chapters of John, Jesus is unaffected. Then he is, deeply. Here’s Jesus in John 11 meeting his friends mourning the death and burial of Lazarus. When Jesus saw Mary weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. *Tarasso.* Jesus wept.

Here’s Jesus in John 12, proclaiming that the time has come. He sees his own death now. “Now is my soul troubled. *Tarasso.*  And what shall I say? Father save me from this hour? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour.

Here’s Jesus in John 13, sitting at the Table with his disciples, whose feet he has just washed. Jesus was troubled in his spirit, *tarasso.* “Truly, truly I say to you, one of you will betray me.”

Three straight chapters reveal the quake in Jesus’ soul. John 11, 12, and 13. In other gospels, Jesus is moved to show compassion to others, but in no other gospel does Jesus weep from his own grief. Nowhere else is he troubled like this. For three chapters we are invited in to the heart and soul of our Lord, he in whom all that is made is made in him. He who has seen the spectacular birth, life, and death of stars, now stares his own death in the face. This is not a messiah floating a foot above the earth anymore. This is a messiah whose sandals are planted firmly in the soil into which he knows he will be buried, whose hands break bread, as his body will be broken; whose eyes look into the faces of those who still do not yet understand, who are faithful and dutiful but who will betray him. This is a messiah who is the head of all things, the firstborn of all creation, who now will give his own life, unto death, into the ground, that in his death, all may have life. If anyone is in Christ, there is new creation.

His soul quakes at this; death is no friend, but he does not run away. He does not flee to some other planet, if such a thing were possible, where people, if there were such a thing, would not hurt him. He stays, he stays, he stays. The new creation will not be ex nihilo, from nothing. The new creation will be a rebirth. And he, the Word of God, the head of all things, he in whom all things hold together, is the seed that must die that we may live.

This is a love story as old as creation. “When I consider the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have ordained, what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name.”

Three chapters, John 11, John 12, John 13 give us this insight into the heart of our Lord. And then we see him, with new resolve, emerge the other side of this quake, not thinking about what he feels about his death, but how you feel at yours. John 14 begins, “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God. Believe also in me.”

Divine assurance in death and everlasting life comes not from gnostic discontinuity with human frailty, but from an encounter with what is in the secret, even the dark, places of our hearts. He understood us: the pain, the fears, the hurts, the deaths; Jesus understood in a way you can only understand by walking miles in human sandals.

A new simplicity becomes him from this point forward in the gospel of John. Everything he said before the trouble was about himself and his identity; everything he says now is about ours. This is true love, that a man, that this man, Jesus Christ, lays down his life for his friends. And you are his friends. You are loved.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YAV96XSdMQo>

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