

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Mind Matters: Manifold Witness”

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Psalm 104:1-24

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We continue today in the series Pastor Mark opened last week, a series we’re calling “Mind Matters.” One of the more persistent challenges to a life of faith would be matters of the...mind, and by that we mean any number of things. They could be intellectual, logical hold-ups to faith. Or, perhaps in thinking of the mind a little bit differently, they could be aspects of mental health. (And roughly speaking, the first half of this series will focus on some of those common intellectual, logical questions or struggles with faith, while the second half will focus on the challenges of mental health and illness to a life of faith.) But among the more common topics that we as pastors hear from you, from within our community, are these struggles with faith specifically due to mindful things.

So how does the Gospel of Christ speak into these things? Pastor Mark opened this series up last week on a passage from the Apostle Paul, from 1 Corinthians: “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing,” and then later, “but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to gentiles.” This is a powerful point for us to remember as we go through this series. Ultimately when we consider these “Mind Matters,” we are told that the message of the cross, the gospel, is not something that is going to be so overpoweringly persuasive merely from the standpoint of logic that a skeptic would have no choice but to change their mind. The “cross is foolishness,” Scripture says.

Instead, may we ask, how is Christ revealed in these questions, these struggles? How are the love and power of God made known?

We come to a passage today that speaks of the many, many ways in which the love and power of God are made known, and perhaps through it, we might ask of the particular claims and struggles between faith and science. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

[Read passage, Psalm 104:1-24.] The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy, Almighty God, maker of heaven and earth, we praise you for the testimony of creation, and for the testimony of your Word. By your Spirit give us ears to hear your Word anew. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

“When I trace at my pleasure the windings to and fro of the heavenly bodies, I no longer touch earth with my feet. I stand in the presence of Zeus himself and take my feel of ambrosia.” Those words came from a mathematician and astronomer named Claudius Ptolemy, of ancient Alexandria. He was speaking of course of the wonder he felt at the majesty of the cosmos, at the unknown, and the sense of the divine he felt.

Many years later, an astrophysicist named Neil DeGrasse Tyson gave an interview. You may recognize the name. But on the chance you don’t, you would probably recognize him from his cameo in the critically acclaimed film, Sharknado 6.

At one point in the interview, he's asked, "What was there before nothing?" "We don't know. It's okay to not know," Tyson replied. The interviewer then said, "That's why I believe in God. There has to be a superior thing that can answer that question."

And then Tyson said this: "You look at where science has yet to tread, yet to figure out, and you say wow that's mysterious, I don't know how that works. God must have done it. There's a long history of this. In 150 AD, Claudius Ptolemy. He wrote in the margin of one of his greatest works about why the planets move back and forth." And then Tyson shared those same words from Ptolemy: "When I trace at my pleasure the windings to and fro of the heavenly bodies, I no longer touch earth with my feet. I stand in the presence of Zeus himself and take my feel of ambrosia," adding, "If to you, God is where science has yet to tread, then God is in an ever-receding pocket of scientific ignorance."

The intersection of faith and science has been a steady point of contention within culture, within thought, within our understanding of the world. On one hand, you have that all-too-human curiosity, the desire to understand, to explore. On the other, you have the human capacity for wonder, for mystery, for recognizing that there is something beyond us, beyond our understanding.

That's much of what we hear out of this psalm, a psalm speaking of all the manifold ways creation testifies to the glory of God. Hear some of those words, starting in v. 1: "Bless the Lord, O my soul. O Lord my God, you are very great. You are clothed with honor and majesty, wrapped in light as with a garment. You stretch out the heavens like tent; you set the beams of your chambers on the waters; you make the clouds your chariot; you ride on the wings of the wind; you make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers. You set the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken."

Do you hear the wonder in these words? "You are clothed with honor and majesty." Creation itself is the garment, the tent, the beams, the chariot, the messengers and ministers of God. Not God himself, and that's an important distinction, creator and creation. But that which God uses, that which testifies to the greatness of God.

The whole psalm goes on like that, touching upon God's sovereignty and majesty as they are witnessed and marveled upon in the foundations of the earth, the provision for all living things, the movement of the heavenly bodies, and that's just in the half of the psalm that we read.

Perhaps in the point the whole psalm leads up to, v. 24, it reads, "O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures." "How manifold are your works!" That's a powerful word there, manifold, multifaceted yet united. We hear it in the words of that hymn, which we'll sing in a little bit, "Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest; Sun, moon and stars in their courses above; Join with all nature in manifold witness; To thy great faithfulness, mercy, and love." The message being, all of creation, in its many ways, some comprehended, many of them not, join together in testifying to the greatness and faithfulness of the Lord.

So yes, on one hand, we have this all-too-human, and I'd say God-given, capacity for wonder, for mystery. We hear it in that hymn. We hear it in this psalm. And then on the other, we have this also all-too-human desire to understand, a curiosity. And the two often feel in tension.

For example, it never took an astrophysicist to recognize that there was a change in what we know as seasons. They may not have called them seasons at first, but humans recognized a long time ago that the days

would get longer, and then they'd get shorter, and along the way the days might get warmer, or colder, or rainier, or drier, and then it would happen again.

In ancient Greece, the seasons came because the goddess Persephone had been abducted by Hades, god of the Underworld. During spring and summer she would be released from the Underworld, and her mother Demeter, goddess of the harvest, out of happiness would make the world blossom. But in the winter, she was forced to go back, and so the world would turn cold.

But then at the same time, there was an ancient philosopher and astronomer named Thales, who among other things tracked the position of the sun in the sky throughout the year, recognizing over time the equinoxes and the solstices, and with them the seasons, corresponding to the position of the sun, not a goddess's grief.

And I wonder what tension may have been felt even way back when. Was it the gods? Or was it the course of the sun and the stars in the heavens? Or was it the gods setting the course of the sun and the stars? And so on, and so on.

I doubt we have anyone here who believes the seasons come because of an abducted goddess, but I know many of us, I mean, probably all of us, struggle with that pull between wonder and understanding, between faith and knowledge.

It's not just limited to ancient Greece. This is in the history of the church. Fast forward from Ptolemy and Thales, and you have guys like Copernicus and Galileo, whose publications faced intense scrutiny and resistance by the church because they offered theories that the sun, not the earth, was the center of the cosmos, that is, that the earth moved around the sun, not the other way around.

Much of this resistance came out of the Roman Catholic Church. You might be familiar with the story of Galileo being placed under house arrest by the Catholic Church. So the story goes, after he was forced to recant his views of the earth's motion around the sun, he defiantly muttered, "And yet it moves."

But before we start patting ourselves on the back as enlightened Presbyterians, John Calvin, founder of the Reformed tradition, said against Copernicus' theory, "We indeed are not ignorant that the circuit of the heavens is finite, and that the earth, like a little globe, is placed in the centre."

That's just one episode. You could almost write the same script again and again. Scientific discovery counter to current religious understanding, resistance, gradual acceptance and adjustment. And for some that all-too-predictable process, when applied to whatever current discoveries or resistance there might be between faith and science, does nothing but discredit the claims of faith. For some, it feels like faith is little more than burying your head in the sand, ignoring empirical, demonstrable truth about the universe.

For you here, right now, maybe it's a family member or a close friend, or maybe it's you yourself, you probably know how it sounds. "Maybe I could get on board with this notion of God or the divine, or maybe something about the loving message of Jesus would be compelling, but I just can't get past the fact that the church ignores/resists clear scientific consensus and still clings to this falsehood that [insert whatever scientific point of contention you'd like here]." Does that sound familiar at all?

Really is a tragic thing. Now understand me, it's not tragic that someone would hold that kind of view. That's understandable, even justifiable. We the church have a track record that is mixed at best when it comes to

scientific inquiry, so if you have a hold-up about church, about faith, because of that history of resistance, you are justified in having it.

No, what's tragic is that again and again the church, the community of faith, has sought to put a barrier, thinking it's a protection, between the claims of faith and our continuing exploration and understanding of God's creation. It's tragic, one because it does put a stumbling block in front of folks who want to be mindful of our understanding of the world, but second because I would say seeking to stifle inquiry or exploration actually conveys a lack of faith, rather than the strength of it.

Think about it. If the message of this psalm is the manifold witness of creation, that every corner of the cosmos speaks to the greatness, the faithfulness, the truth of the Lord, then a strength of faith would seek to understand more and more of it, not just out of curiosity or exploration, but that we might we know a little bit more fully the greatness and faithfulness of God. If we hold true the claims of Colossians, that in Christ all things hold together, then seeking to understand just how things work and hold together scientifically means that we might come to know a little bit more fully who Christ is.

Now our understanding of that greatness, of that faithfulness might have to change as a result. It has plenty of times before. Beliefs, understandings of God, of Scripture had to change in light of accepting that the earth moved around the sun rather than vice versa, but did it lessen the majesty of the Lord? No. If anything it expands it.

As humanity explored the building blocks of creation, we considered the grain of sand, then even smaller, the molecule, then even smaller, the atom, then even smaller, the proton, neutron, and electron, then even smaller, the quarks, and for the time being, quarks are the smallest of elementary particles, not composed of anything else, but maybe that'll change as we discover more. But at every step, is the majesty of God lessened? No. At every step, it shows the manifold ways Christ holds everything together.

Or as humanity explored the cosmos, the immense scale of the heavens, we considered the earth and its place in the stars, then even bigger, the solar system, then even bigger, the galaxy, then even bigger the universe, and for the time being, the universe is the totality of what we observe and understand, but maybe that'll change as we discover more. But at every step, is the majesty of God lessened? No, at every step, it shows the unfathomable scale, the manifold witness of the glory of God.

Let me leave you with a word from three scientists.

First, from Nobel-prize winning chemist D. H. R. Barton, "God is Truth. There is no incompatibility between science and religion. Both are seeking the same truth."

Second, from theoretical physicist and Anglican priest John Polkinghorne, "If we are seeking to serve the God of truth then we should really welcome truth from whatever source it comes. We shouldn't fear the truth."

And finally, a story from that same astronomer Thales who discerned the course of the sun and the seasons. So the story goes, one day he was walking through the fields at night, gazing upward as he went along, captivated by the stars, studying them, considering them, in wonder because of them, when he fell into a well.

A young girl came upon him in the well and chided him, saying, "You're crazy to know about what is up in the heavens while you could not see what is in front of you beneath your feet."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.