

“A Little Lower Than the Angels”

a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on June 12, 2022

based on Psalm 8

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

Leonard Cohen

Back in 1974 I spent five months in Italy. During our first week there a number of the college age women in our group stayed with local families in Rome. All came back with stories of cultural differences. I remember one who told us how Romans, different from Americans, like to close all inside doors. When she would forget and leave a bedroom door open someone would complain to her saying, “Did you grow up in the forum?” meaning the ruins of the ancient Roman Forum where there are no doors at all, nor are there ceilings nor roofs.

I’m thinking of the line in today’s Psalm that begins, *When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established . . .*

You know, the ancients looked at the moon and the stars every evening. Unlike us city dwellers, they were hardly ever indoors. It’s estimated that most of us spend 93% of our time indoors. Every evening the ancients 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. My daughter is back in Oregon for a visit this month. 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, 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 those 3 to be there, twinkling down on us every night.

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, Sirius, 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 particular 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 daughters, 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 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 operate out of a stance of wonder; to entertain the miracle.

Once in a while I look into the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. Not long ago I found an essay by a screenwriter from LA, on why she goes to church every week. Her name is Dorothy Fortenberry. Dorothy is best known for her contribution to *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.

You know, 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 also 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 [God]'s time. If anyone is able to structure [God]'s time efficiently, it ought to be God.

Dorothy ends with this last bit – “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 a supermoon and Orion 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.

St. Irenaeus is remembered to have said, “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.”

I want to close with this word from another amazingly alive woman, Anne Lamott, a writer who is a survivor and who gives me hope every time I read her. She wrote this very recently ...

I am going to be 68 in six days, if I live that long. I'm optimistic. Mostly.

God, what a world. What a heartbreaking, terrifying freak show. It is completely ruining my birthday plans. I was going to celebrate how age and the grace of myopia have given me the perspective that almost everything sorts itself out in the end. That good will and decency and charity and love always eventually conspire to bring light into the darkest corners. That the crucifixion only looked like a big win for the Romans.

But turning 68 means you weren't born yesterday. Turning 68 means you've seen what you've seen—Ukraine, Sandy Hook, the permafrost...Marjorie Taylor Greene.

By 68, you have seen dear friends literally ravaged by cancer, lost children, unspeakable losses. The midterms are coming up. My mind is slipping. My dog died.

Really, to use the theological terms, it is just too frigging much.

And regrettably, by 68, one is both seriously uninterested in a vigorous debate on the existence of evil, or even worse, a pep talk.

So what does that leave? Glad you asked: the answer is simple. A few very best friends with whom you can share your truth. That's the main thing. By 68, you know that the whole system of our lives works because we are not all nuts on the same day. You call someone and tell them that you hate everyone and all of life, and they will be glad you called. They felt that way three days ago and you helped them pull out of it by making them laugh or a cup of tea. You took them for a walk, or to Target.

Also, besides our friends, getting outside and looking up and around changes us: remember, you can trap bees on the bottom of Mason jars with a bit of honey and without a lid, because they don't look up.

They just walk around bitterly bumping into the glass walls. That is SO me. All they have to do is look up and fly away. So we look up. In 68 years, I have never seen a boring sky. I have never felt blasé about the moon, or the stars, or birdsong, or paper whites.

It is a crazy drunken clown college outside our windows now, almost too much beauty and renewal to take in. The world is warming up.

Well, how does appreciating spring help the people of Ukraine? If we believe in chaos theory, and the butterfly effect, that the flapping of a Monarch's wings near my home can lead to a weather change in Tokyo, then maybe noticing beauty—flapping our wings with amazement—changes things in ways we cannot begin to imagine. It means goodness is quantum. Even to help the small world helps. Even prayer, which seems to do nothing. Everything is connected.

... Probably best to have both feet on the ground, ogle the daffodils, take a sack of canned good over to the food pantry, and pick up trash. This helps our insides enormously.

So Sunday I will celebrate the absolutely astonishing miracle that I, specifically, was even born. As Fredrick Buechner wrote, "The grace of God means something like, "Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party wouldn't have been complete without you."

I will celebrate that I have shelter and friends and warm socks and feet to put them in, and that God or Gus found a way to turn the madness and shame of my addiction into grace, I'll shake my head with wonder, which I do more and more as I age, at all the beauty that is left and still works after so much has been taken away.

Amen.