

“The Eschatological Itch: The Saga of a Roomy God”

1 Corinthians 2:9

November 7, 2021

This morning I want to have a conversation with you about life, about God, and also about you. When someone asks you if you believe in God, I suspect that most of you who are here today would say, “We do.” But what do you say if you are asked the next question: “Tell me, why do you believe in God?” How do you respond? My hunch is that most of us do not respond with philosophical arguments. We simply tell stories, very personal stories, stories reflecting our encounters with God and our experience of things holy.

The young Lutheran theologian Andrew Root says that living in the world we do, a world shorn of the divine, the best way to talk about God is to talk about everyday life. To tell stories. So we tell stories because God is deeply incarnational. In Jesus Christ, God acts and arrives in history. God is a personal being who moves in time and identifies with events.

It was over two years ago when Chris invited me to preach, and then came COVID. Frankly, it’s rather scary to have two plus years to think about a text. So this year I found myself looking at our text through the lens of my life. And I made what, for me, was a rather interesting discovery. I discovered that for all of my life, I have been playing hopscotch with a virus, albeit a spiritual virus. I call the virus “The Eschatological Itch” because it’s a virus that somehow unnerves me whenever I look at the future and don’t know what it holds. When I look at the future and things I really cannot control, then I become rather anxious.

Saint Paul writes, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no human mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.” And I read that text, and a sense of wonderment washes across my mind, sparking curiosity. What is the future? How

do we understand it? The contemporary philosopher Charles Taylor says that we live in an age which he describes as “The Malaise of Modernity.” By that he simply means that in our search for the authentic, for what is real, we find that search going on in a world suspicious of the supernatural.

So we tell stories.

I think I was four maybe five years old when I first became aware of the virus. Do you remember the first time as a child you thought about death? My mother was gone for the night. We were living with her parents. My bedroom was upstairs at the end of a long hallway that seemed to run forever. So it was my granny who tucked me in bed that night, and we went through the usual ritual with the prayer:

*Now I lay me down to sleep.
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake.
I pray the Lord my soul to take.*

A curious prayer with which to tuck a child in bed and leave them alone in a world of hungering darkness. And I began to think. What happens to people when they die? I had no sophisticated cosmology. In my simple mind, I lived in a three-storied world in which you only had two directions: you went up, or you went down. And I knew, at least from hearing the preacher, you sure didn’t want to go down. More to the point, I knew precisely where down was: It was in my grandfather’s basement. A humongous coal-burning, fire-eating, flame-throwing furnace with peek-a-boo holes in the doors—It was scary. Every time I went to that basement, somehow I thought of the story my uncle had told me from the Book of Daniel about the

three Hebrew children who were tossed into a fiery furnace by the brutish King Nebuchadnezzar. Well, that was the furnace! You didn't want to go down.

I don't know how long I lay there fussing and turning before the door opened and my granny peered in. She said, "Billy, are you ok?"

"No, Granny," I said. "Tell me: What would happen to me if I died? I wouldn't go to that big furnace, would I?"

Chuckling, my granny said, "Of course not, Billy." And then growing serious she said: "Billy, remember this: You are God's child. You belong to God, and God is a God of love."

Looking back on that night eighty-some years ago, it was as if this roomy God walked into my bedroom that night in the person of my granny and answered two of life's foundational questions. Who am I? I am God's child. I am made in God's image. And who is God? What is God like? God is a God of love. And she said a little prayer, and I slipped into sleep, at peace with life and with the world.

The eschatological itch: How can I describe it? It's a rather grating of the soul that frequently grabs us at the intersections, the turning points of life. It's a kind of irritant that raises prickly questions like: Am I as a human alone, on my own, homeless in a yawning universe? Or perchance am I part of something that is bigger than myself? The Eschatological itch is God scratching at the windowpane of our lives, suggesting in the words of our text that "Maybe, maybe, just maybe, there is more to life than we humans can conceive with our minds and see with our eyes."

The 19th century poet Francis Thompson had an intriguing way of talking about this eschatological itch. He called it the "Hound of Heaven," the saga of a stealthy God who, in his words, tracks us "down the nights and days of life, the arches of the years...with unhurrying chase and unperturbed pace."

Think about the stories you tell. How often do your

stories reflect a crucial intersection, a turning point in life?

Turning points! I think of a trip I had with 22 of your sons and daughters, the first Footsteps of Faith trip about 20 years ago. Late one night we were sitting in the lounge of our ship into the wee hours of the morning, talking about life, about faith, about God. Young people at one of those intersections, leaving home, entering college and university, for the first time on their own.

I think of a husband who had little place for religion in his life, and then one day he found himself looking down, holding in his arms his firstborn child. And a new set of questions crossed his mind. What does it mean to be a parent? What are the moral values that my wife and I are to pass on to this, our child? The journey of faith began. Turning points.

I think of that story in Luke's gospel. We call it the story of the rich young ruler. I like to think it's the story of a 30-something. He is young. He is wealthy. He is religious. He has social class. He is climbing to the top of the corporate ladder. Yet a kind of hollowness shreds his soul. He comes to Jesus. He has one simple question. "Jesus, what is life eternal all about?" In other words, "How can I find meaning and purpose in life?" Jesus' answer is downright disarming. Jesus simply says, "Forget your money. Forget your social status. Forget your religiosity. Just come on along, and follow me."

What does it mean for us to follow Jesus? The late Dutch priest Henri Nouwen has a little book with that title in which he makes this astute observation. He says often you and I are more wanderers than followers. We run around a lot. We do a lot of different things. Or we just sit and do nothing. So, Jesus says, "Stop running around. Don't just sit there. Find a purpose for your life. Follow me."

What does it mean for us to follow Jesus? I am always intrigued. What's it mean for you, who sit in these pews, to follow Jesus in the world in which you live and work post-Sunday?

One day many years ago I was having that conversation with my late friend Steve Beering. Steve was an Elder in this congregation, but many of you will know the name because for 18 years Steve was the president of Purdue University. As we were talking about this question, Steve said, “Well, let me tell you a story. One day a disgruntled student came into my office. She was very upset with me. She had on her wrist one of those bracelets that had on it the letters WWJD, *What Would Jesus Do?* She was absolutely convinced that I was not doing what her Jesus was telling her that I should do. I listened,” he said. “And then after all I said, ‘Well you know I, too, am a Christian. I, too, live with that question: What would Jesus have me do? But the difference is this. The answer is not: What do you think your Jesus is telling you to tell me to do? The answer is: What is the Jesus I follow telling me to do?’”

And a lightbulb flashed in my mind. Following Jesus is different from following a famous person, joining a movement, or embracing a certain protocol. To follow Jesus is to take the time to listen, to listen to our lives, to listen to what is happening all around us.

We all travel different roads, our roads reflecting our circumstances and our calling. But whatever the road, to follow Jesus is to live life in *his* Spirit, *his* light, with *his* heart **but** with *our* spirit, *our* heart, *our* light. To follow Jesus is to work for the flourishing of all the institutions and organizations of which we are a part. In short, it is to become carriers of grace in the neighborhoods where we live.

The eschatological itch. I sense that today, that itch has become acute. COVID has awakened us all to the fragility of life and our own mortality. I was awakened to that almost two years ago when I read a post on Facebook from a young mother in this congregation. She simply wrote: “Last night, my doctor husband came home from the hospital. He’s working in the emergency room now. And he said to me, ‘Dear, you and I have to sit down and have a conversation we’ve never talked about. We need to talk about my death, the fact that I may catch this disease and die.’”

The eschatological itch raises the ultimate question about life beyond death. How do we as Christians envision God’s tomorrow? In what kind of God do we believe?

Our text suggests that God’s tomorrow “is beyond what we can see, hear, or comprehend.” So the Bible offers no blueprints for tomorrow, but it does something most interesting. It paints pictures with words. Jesus told stories. We call them parables. They are meant to serve as windows through which we catch hints and glimmers of God’s tomorrow. But note this: All of those are frost-coated windows, as if we were peering through a foggy glass, seeing but moving shadows. And yet they are pictures to spark our imagination because they assure us of this: There is a tomorrow, and we are part of God’s tomorrow. Albeit, it’s a tomorrow framed in mystery.

How do you live with that mystery? I love the tongue in cheek answer of the poet Mary Oliver. She says, “I don’t care how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. It’s enough to know that...they exist, and that they dance.” It’s enough to know that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. Now we know in part, but one day we will know fully.

Frosty windows. I think of a passage in John’s gospel. The disciples understand that they do not have too much time with Jesus, and so they are curious. They say, “Jesus, where are you going? Can we come along too?” Jesus’ answer is simply uncanny. Jesus simply says, “Don’t worry about it. Don’t worry. Trust me. Trust God. In my father’s house there are many rooms. And guess what! I’m going to get your room ready for you. And when it’s ready, I’ll come back and get you so you can live where I live.”

The God we see in Jesus is a roomy God, a God who excludes no one and makes room for everyone. The life, the death, the resurrection of Jesus all reveal to us the roominess of God, because Easter is now the lens through which we look at God’s tomorrow. It’s a lens assuring us that there is more to life than death. But Easter tells us something else. It tells us that ultimately you and I live in a world that will be one

day ambushed by grace.

Ambushed by grace. Some of the hairs on the back of my mind begin to stand up because I say to myself, “Whatever happens to justice? I rather like this roomy God, but I don’t know that I want God to get too roomy.” And I begin to think about some of the *others* in my life, maybe you think of some of the *others* in your life. People who have offended you. People who have done you wrong. People who have betrayed you. People who have different social, political, religious viewpoints than yours. Sometimes bad people, just plain criminals, who make the headline news. There is something inside me that says all these people have to have their comeuppance. Justice.

I’m looking again at one of those frosty stories Jesus told. It’s our gospel lesson today. Jesus is in Jerusalem. His death is imminent. His critics are ready to arrest him, but they’re curious. They have one last question to ask him. They say, “Jesus, you always talk about your kingdom. What do you mean by your kingdom, the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven?” And Jesus answers that question by telling the story we call the Parable of the Wedding Banquet. It really is the story of a God who as host for the party goes to the slums and alleyways of life to invite people, street people, renegades, all those *others*, to sit at the table.

One of my favorite theologians, Yale theologian Miroslav Volf, describes it as a story of exclusion and embrace. It’s a story reminding us that in heaven there will be some people we don’t like. And then Volf has the audacity to suggest that if you and I are really going to enjoy heaven, maybe something else must change in us.

One day following his lecture on this topic, a young student came up to him. She was African American. Anger blistered her face as images and memories of racism frosted her mind. She turned to him and said, “Professor, do you know what you are saying?” Volf simply replied, “I know. It’s scandalous, isn’t it?” For just a moment they both stood there. Then, she whispered, “But it wouldn’t be Heaven if it were otherwise. Would it?”

This last year, as I began to read this story through the lens of Easter, a rather heretical thought crossed my mind. I wonder, might this story of a wedding banquet simply be a preview of the opening night in God’s Heaven? The gala that sets everything into motion? A wedding banquet, a grace-filled event, freeing us for life in the kingdom.

I began to think about some of these *others* in my life. One of them in particular: my father, a man I never knew.

My parents divorced when I was six years of age. My father was living in another town. I had not seen him for several years. I was in middle school, junior high school. It was my birthday, so he came to town one Saturday to take me to lunch. As we sat at lunch, my dad said, “Billy, what would you like for Christmas?” I said, “Well, Dad, you know, a lot of the guys on the basketball team have wristwatches. I would love to have a wristwatch.” So after lunch we went around the corner to the jewelry store, and there it was—that beautiful gold-rimmed Elgin watch with brown straps. Then Christmas came, and Christmas went. No watch, no card, no call. Never again did I talk to my dad. My dad died in my junior year in college, and there was no way I was going to that funeral because an ulcer blistered my soul. I wanted nothing to do with my dad.

Then one night, about the time I turned 40, this roomy God walked into my field of dreams. My dad came to me. He said, “I’m sorry.” He said, “I really look forward to heaven when we’ll get to know each other.” I can’t say for sure what happened that night. All I know is that when I woke up, the ulcer was gone, and I was free to tell my story.

Wishful thinking? I think not. The writer Frederick Buechner describes wishful thinking as “the wings the truth comes true on.” Now as I await the turn of life’s final corner, I really find myself looking forward to that event. What’s it going to be like? What’s going to happen? And as I think about it, the words of an old Negro Spiritual begin to hum in my mind:

*Oh, one of these days
I'm gonna sit at the welcome table.
One of these days.
I'm gonna feast on milk and honey.
One of these days
I'm gonna sit at the welcome table...
And, I'm gonna tell God how you treat me.*

The welcome table. It's the table of joy and also a table of justice. Justice, where confession and repentance take place. Joy because it's justice framed in mercy, freeing us for all new relationships. Joy and justice, locking arms in the great tango of redemption and reconciliation.

The eschatological itch. It's a virus reminding us that indeed we are part of something bigger than ourselves. It's the saga of a roomy God. And God be praised. Amen.

ⁱ Andrew Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age*.

ⁱⁱ Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*

ⁱⁱⁱ Francis Thompson (1980), *The Hound of Heaven*

^{iv} Luke 18:18-23.

^v Henri Nouwen, *Following Jesus*.

^{vi} Mary Oliver, *Angels*

^{vii} John 14:1-3; *The Message*

^{viii} Andrew Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, pp. 258-266.

^{ix} N.T. Wright, *History and Eschatology*, Chapters 6 & 7.

^x *The Gospel of Matthew*, 22:1-3,8-10.

^{xi} Miroslav Volf, *Love Your Heavenly Enemy*, *Christianity Today*, 10/23/2000. 94f.

^{xii} Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, p. 96.