



Lexington Presbyterian Church

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A Parallel Universe?

John 3:14-21 & Numbers 21:4-9

A sermon by William M. Klein

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4 From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. 5 The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." 6 Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. 7 The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. 8 And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." 9 So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live. (Num. 21:4-9 NRSV)

14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17 "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19 And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. 20 For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21 But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God." (Jn. 3:14-21 NRSV)

1

A number of years ago I read the book Flatland, by Edwin Abbott. I had known of the book only as Albert Einstein's favorite. That commendation alone had made me leery of the book. If it was as incomprehensible to me as the work of Einstein then I wasn't sure it would provide my feeble brain with much reading pleasure.

Then several years ago a book club to which I belonged chose this as one of its books. What do you know! I found Edwin Abbott's tale to be a charmer, very accessible, and enormously insightful.

Flatland tells the story of a "person" who lives in a two dimensional universe. He and every other being in his universe have length and depth. Some "people" are round, others octagonal; others square. All females are triangular...with one of the angles being very sharp and pointed.

As the story unfolds the narrator encounters a "person" who lives in a one dimensional universe. Communication between them is very difficult because they share no common language or experience. The one dimensional "person" whose worldview

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entails being a dot...and sometimes a dot along a series of dots...has no way of understanding what it even means to have an additional dimension.

Later in the story the two dimensional narrator encounters a "person" who lives a three dimensional reality. It is only because the two dimensional "person" previously had the encounter with the one dimensional "person" that he has even the slightest way of conceptualizing what three dimensions might be.

The book's message is clear. We read in the book's dedication that the humble native of Flatland writes in hopes that because of his encounter with the mysteries of three dimensions, his fellow two dimensional beings may be humbled enough to realize they are not the essence and end of existence. They are not the center of the universe. They are not all there is. He hopes his contribution may help enlarge their imagination to the degree they may aspire yet to higher secrets of four, five, or even six dimensions.

The narrator's fear is that his countrymen will simply dismiss him as a loony. My delight in the book and its challenge to us may have caused you to do the same with me. Be that as it may, in the hope my musings have not yet prompted your mind to wander to your shopping list or to a quick nap...I want us to give some thought this morning to how our imaginations may be enlarged to the degree that we may aspire to the things of God at work in our world.

2

When we talk about the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world there is a sense in which we are talking about different dimensions. These different dimensions are not unrelated...but for those people who lack sufficient imagination, the kingdom of God is either immaterial or does not exist.

In the world of quantum mechanics (of which I know absolutely nothing) there is a theory described as the **parallel universe** or **alternate reality**. These theories suppose there is a self-contained separate reality coexisting with our own.¹ No wonder Einstein liked Flatland.

I am drawn to the theory because of its segue to faith. Many, if not most, of us live as if the only things that exist are the things that have to do with our appetites - things we can perceive by way of our senses and our reason. The food on the table - the omnipresent sound of the radio or *Spotify* - the smell of a daffodil - the firm grip of a handshake - the finality of death. The realities of this temporal existence are **all** that exist. There is no alternative and parallel coexisting world. A spiritual realm beyond our grasp and control and verification is nothing more than quaint fancy.

As people of faith, though, we say something very different, don't we? At least on Sunday mornings we say the realm of the spirit is just as real as the realm of the physical, the material. When pressed, even the most doubt-filled Christian will say the things of the spirit lay claim to the heart and mind and imagination as surely as things of the flesh. From such a perspective we say prayer is as vital to human life as air. And we say that laying up treasure in God's spiritual kingdom is, in fact, more important than laying up treasure in this mortal life. As Christians we believe the realm of the spirit coexists with the material realm.

The notion of a parallel universe may not be a perfect allegory. Still, it is awfully suggestive - and it serves to awaken the eye within...the spiritual eye that makes it

possible for us to perceive and trust the real story, the underlying story. And that underlying story has to do with the God-centered, God-dependent, God-saturated nature of life.

3

When we choose to ignore the coexistence of the spiritual and material realms we effectively choose to be oblivious to so much of that matters most in this life. Take, for example, the story presented to us by the Old Testament reading this morning.

The passage from Numbers takes us to the years during the Exodus – sometime around the year 1445 BC. Four hundred thirty years earlier Jacob and his family moved from Canaan to Egypt in search of food. In time his descendants had become oppressed slaves in Egypt. The God of Jacob and Rachel heard the cries of these Hebrew slaves and, through his servant Moses, caused them to flee Egypt bound for a promised land. The journey from Egypt to a promised land, though, was dangerous and long. Forty years they journeyed, wandering round and round, led by a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day.

The farther the Hebrew slaves traveled from Egypt, the more romantically they engaged in nostalgia for the “flesh pots” of Egypt. We do the same every time when we wax eloquent about the “good old days” which never were quite as good as we remember...and were certainly never good for some people.²

Terrible as life had been in Egypt for the Hebrews...at least there they knew what each day would bring and they could be in some control of their lives. At least in Egypt they knew Pharaoh would make sure they got fed leeks and cucumbers.³

They hated, they despised, the scarcity of supplies the wilderness provided – having to depend upon God every day for food and water and protection and direction. They became impatient...and they became chronic complainers. Grumblers is what they were – grumbling about how mistreated they were by God and Moses. They forgot how terrible life had been under Pharaoh’s cruel taskmasters.⁴

According to the text, God sent serpents among the grumbling, ungrateful Israelites to bite them. Many died.

I have to say that my New Testament faith has a hard time imagining God directly punishing the people in this way – no matter how much they deserved it. But that is what the text says.

The significance of the story may lie somewhere in the intersection of the spiritual and the material. Perhaps we are meant to conclude the punishment wrought by serpents was a symbolic way of giving the people precisely what they wanted. They wanted Egypt, didn’t they? Here it was. Let me explain.

You see, in Egyptian tradition a bronze cobra was placed on the headdress of the pharaohs. This cobra symbolized a protective goddess who would spit fiery venom onto the enemies of the pharaoh.⁵ It may be that when the Israelites saw the serpents they automatically thought of the Egyptian bronze cobra and remembered with greater clarity how cruel life had really been. It may be the troublesome serpents were meant to remind the people their rose-colored memory had let them forget just how stifling and deadly life in Egypt really was. It may be the curious drama was meant to impress upon them how

little they were aware of the underlying story of their existence – how much they had taken God’s daily provision for granted.

If this interpretation has any validity, what Moses did next becomes even more powerful. God gave Moses an antidote to the deadly serpents. And that antidote was a serpent – a bronze one fastened to a pole and lifted high above the people. Anyone bitten by a serpent was to look up at this bronze serpent on a pole and he or she would live.

I’d say that was an odd remedy – but then it prefigures so much of what modern medicine has done with the practice of vaccinations. In order to cure polio, for example, researchers learned that if they inject a tiny amount of the polio virus into the human body, the immune system goes to work to create a vaccine against the deadly virus. The result is immunization against the dangers of polio.

At God's direction, Moses placed the deadly serpent on a pole to serve as the antidote to real snake bite. It was a demonstration of the power of God over the powers of Egypt’s gods. It was a way of saying that while the serpent of Egypt caused death for the Israelite slaves, the serpent fashioned by the one true God could overcome that death and grant true, meaning-filled life. And it was precisely what John the gospel writer tells us God accomplished for us when Jesus became the saving snake lifted high upon a pole on Calvary.

4

The coexistence of the spiritual and material undergirds all of life. God so loved the world that he gave us his Son. If this is not the story that defines our understanding of reality – then we are letting the wrong stories define us.⁶

We don’t have to live by these wrong stories...because, as people of faith, we have heard the right story. God loves us. God loves us enough to send us a Son. God doesn’t want us to choose death – God wants us to choose life.⁷ God wants us to use our inner eye – our spiritual eye that makes it possible for us to perceive the real story, the underlying story. God wants us to march into the darkest corners of this planet with eyes wide open to the horrors – and hearts opened wider to the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

I am absolutely convinced God intends for us to live fully in this life – to enjoy life to the full...to let our cup overflow. I am also convinced this happens, even if only in a partial sense, because we are mindful of the spiritual dimension of life – because we are constantly attentive to the presence and work of the Spirit of God.

Our high calling is to give witness to the unseen God who is at the center of this life and of our lives. And if the world is to know the about this dimension, it falls to us to tell the story through the words we speak, the works of our hands, and the prayers of our hearts. Amen.



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Endnotes:

¹ See www.en.wikipedia.org – see “parallel universe.” The “many-worlds interpretation” (or MWI) is an interpretation of quantum mechanics that rejects the non-deterministic and irreversible wave-function collapse associated with measurement in the Copenhagen interpretation in favor of a description in terms of quantum entanglement and reversible time evolution of states. The phenomena associated with measurement are explained by decoherence that occurs when states interact with the environment. (I have no idea what this means.)

² Dyson, Michael Eric. 2017. *Tears We Cannot Stop*. NY: St. Martin’s Press, 77. “The golden age of the past is a fiction, a projection of nostalgia that selects what is most comforting to remember. It summons a past that was not great for all; in fact, it is a past that was not great at all, not with racism and sexism clouding the culture. Going back to a time what was great depends on deliberate ‘disremembering.’”

³ See Numbers 11:4-6.

⁴ Brueggemann, Walter. et. al. 1993. *Texts for Preaching: Year B*. Louisville: WJK Press, 221.

⁵ Dozeman, Thomas B. 1998. *Numbers*. *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 2. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 164. The goddess was Wadjyt.

⁶ See John 3:19.

⁷ See Deuteronomy 30:19.