

From the Pastor's Desk

Is God Personal

Last evening, I did my normal ritual before going to bed—I took our dog Joey out to do his business. Part of my ritual is to gaze into the heavens while Joey sniffs the earth looking for the perfect spot to deposit his cigar. Believe it or not, this can be a spiritual experience. It is amazing to gaze into the universe and see the moon and stars all in the vast distances of space. Astronomers say the universe is 14 to 15 billion years old and still expanding with new stars and planets being created at this very moment. Compared to the vastness of the universe, the earth is a little speck of dust. The further the Hubble space telescope looks into the universe, the smaller we seem to become. We have a vastly different view of the world than did the authors of scripture who viewed the earth as the center, with sun, moon and stars rotating around it. In other words, these ancient people perceived themselves as the center of the universe, which is a very gratifying thought and, as Galileo found, not easily abandoned. And so, with my neck bent back and eyes staring into infinity, I cannot help but wonder about the power that created it all and just how personal this power is. Modern science has created a quandary: Does the God who created the vast universe with its laws of science and evolution have much interest in us or care about the day to day activities of our lives? Such is the existential angst of our modern era. How one answers this question is extremely important in finding meaning, hope and purpose in life. As we return to the house, Joey is content and relieved and I am swept up in mystery.

A few years ago, a mountain lion was spotted in a tree in our neighbors lot next door. Joey wouldn't have a chance against the power, claws and jaws of a mountain lion, or a coyote or probably a fox either. All of these predators are in the area so my reasons for accompanying Joey outside is not just to gaze at the universe, but also to protect the little guy from any harm. It would break our hearts if anything were to happen to him. I am his "shepherd" and he is my "sheep". There is no doubt that I would face down a mountain lion to protect my little Joey.

For the past several Sundays, I have been doing a sermon series on Psalm 23:

"The LORD is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want. He lets me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul; He leads me along the right paths for His name's sake. Even when I go through the darkest valley, I fear no danger, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff—they comfort me." Psalm 23:1-4

According to Philip Keller, author of "A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23", it is necessary to understand how a sheep can become "cast down" in order to understand the intimacy and love of the shepherd's care found in Psalm 23. It is not uncommon for sheep to become "cast down" (or "cast") when it lays in a comfortable indentation in the ground, rolls over and ends up with all four hoofs in the air unable to get back on its feet. If left in that condition for very long it will die. When the shepherd notices sheep missing, one of his main concerns is that it has become "cast down". He will leave the ninety nine in order to find the cast down sheep and help it to its feet. He recalls: *"As soon as I reached the cast sheep, my first impulse was to pick it up. Tenderly I would roll the sheep over on its side. This would relieve the pressure of gases in its stomach. If it was down for long, I would have to lift it to its feet. Straddling the sheep with my legs, I would rub its limbs to restore the circulation to its legs, and say something like 'you little rascal, I was afraid I had lost you'. When the sheep started to walk again, it would stumble and collapse once more. Little by little the sheep would regain its equilibrium. All this pageantry is conveyed to my heart and mind when I hear the statement 'He restores my soul'. Many have the idea that when a child of God falls, when he is frustrated and helpless in a spiritual dilemma, God becomes disgusted, fed-up, and even furious with him. But, this is simply not so. Christ is our shepherd. He has the same sensations of anxiety,*

concern and compassion for the “cast” men and women as I had for cast sheep. This is why he looks on us with such compassion and love.”

Does our God, who created the vastness of the universe with its laws of physics and evolution have the same compassion for us as a loving shepherd does for his sheep? Or, as you do for your children or grandchildren? Or, as I do for my beloved pet Joey as well as other loved ones and our congregation? The biblical witness resounds with a clear YES! Not only is God the creator of the vast universe. God is also personal and to claim otherwise is to put limits on God and negate revelation, particularly the New Testament where we see in Christ and his teachings just how personal God is:

Jesus said to his disciples: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. Life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest? “Consider how the lilies grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith! And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Luke 12:22-32

While preparing sermons on various parts of Psalm 23, I have been amazed at the intimacy, care and concern a loving shepherd has for his sheep. Clearly, his heart is moved when he sees them hurting or in danger. Jesus referred to himself as “The Good Shepherd” and applied the metaphor of a shepherd’s love and concern for sheep as God’s love and concern for his people. Again, we see how personal God is:

“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.” Luke 10:14-15

“I know my sheep and my sheep know me” are words of intimacy with God. In Luke, the word “know” is far more than intellectual knowledge. It entails a union of mind and soul. If the message, life, death and resurrection of Jesus says anything, it is that God is very personal to each and everyone of us. While studying economics in college, I took classes in macro economics, which had to do with global economics and micro economics which had to do local economics. Both interrelate with one another. One could also say God is both macro (the creator of the cosmos) and micro (personal). And, of course, God is much more than this as our human language can never capture the totality of God.

Intimacy with God is best celebrated and nourished in quiet prayer time at home and in our faith community where we listen to the scriptures, are fed with the spiritual food of bread and wine and reach out with love and encouragement to one another. ~ PB

Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. (Now that’s personal!! :-)

I John 4:8