

Welcome

One of the reasons I'm so fascinated by space is the pure vastness of it all. We're 93 *million* miles from the Sun. Dallas to Houston is about 225 miles. Imagine that distance is a millimeter. In that case, the Sun would be 4 ½ football fields away. If we wanted to travel to the Sun, well, the fastest manned airspeed ever recorded was in the X-15 rocket in 1967, at 4500 mph. If we left *right now*, we'd get there around Easter of 2023.

And we're the third closest planet! Some of the other planets take hundreds of years to complete *one* orbit of the Sun. And did you know that it would take 1300 earths to fill up Jupiter, the largest planet in our solar system?

But move *outside* our solar system and things get really nuts. We're 4.3 lightyears from the nearest star, which translates into 25,000,000,000,000. If the distance from the Earth to the Sun is 1 mm (show), then the distance to Alpha Centauri is 3 football fields!

At that speed, it would take over 600,000 *years* for us to make the trip. That's three times longer than humans have existed on earth.

And that's to the *closest* star.

Trust me - space only gets more mind-bending from there.

One of the unending questions that the unfathomable vastness of space raises is... Where is everybody?

In such an impossibly enormous universe, there should be countless alien civilizations. So where are they all?

This is a serious question serious scientists ask - they even have a name for it: the Fermi paradox. Why is space so... empty?

There are a number of potential answers - everything from the cynical idea that civilizations that reach a certain point in development always destroy themselves (like once you go Facebook it's all over).

Another is that space is SO vast that we're all just missing each other. After all, if an alien species has their radio telescopes pointed right at us (a huge coincidence), but they're say 200 light years away (not very far in space terms), our first broadcasts won't reach them for almost another century!

In other words, fear not true believers. There may be some great reasons we haven't heard from aliens yet.

But I bring up the Fermi paradox because it highlights something pretty profound: human life is incredibly precious. Well, not just human life, but all life on Earth. We're finding more and more

exoplanets, after all, and nearly none of them have even the *potential* for life. The few that do hold at most hope for single-cell life (which, while still incredibly cool, isn't anything like intelligent civilizations).

No, so far as we can tell, intelligent life is vanishingly rare. It's wondrous. We might even say... miraculous.

I want to begin here today because we're going to be talking about God as creator today. What does it mean for us to talk about God as the creator?

For us, that role emerges from the miracle of life: we have a sense that we were created for a purpose. We were created by one who wants to be in relationship with us.

Message

Welcome to the season of Epiphany! We've just finished our Christmas celebration of God with us. Epiphany asks a very important question: who is God? The answer we find in Epiphany is: God is who we meet in Jesus. Another way to say that is: If we want to know who God is, then our very best picture of God is Jesus.

This year, our Epiphany series is called "From A to Z". We're exploring some of the big themes of the Bible, themes that illustrate who God is. As you might expect from the title, we're going to see how these themes show up throughout Scripture. How they reach their fullness in Jesus. And how they help us live today as we anticipate Jesus' return.

In other words, this is a series about how Jesus shows us the God who has been at work from the beginning and will keep working to the very end.

I want to begin with a pretty basic question: how do we know there's a God at all? This is a challenging question, and literally millions of pages have been written debating this idea from every conceivable angle.

What this will *not* become today is an argument between faith and science. You've heard these sorts of arguments, right? As our body of scientific knowledge grows more and more vast, a number of us wonder if we 'need' God anymore. It's a fair question, especially since for a lot of people throughout history, belief in God has been a product of what scholars of religion call "magical thinking". Magical thinking is when we imagine that invisible powers control the world around us - so we say a certain set of words (like *expecto patronus*) and then something happens. Or we combine certain ingredients in a specific way to create a drink that makes people fall in love - Love Potion No. 9. Or - if I might step on your toes - when you're circling for a parking spot and you pray and then you find a parking spot.

Magical thinking is the opposite of scientific thinking, which is grounded in the observable, in cause and effect. If the apple falls from the tree, there must be a *cause* - in this case, a force caused gravity, which is a measurable function of the masses of the earth and the apple. Magical thinking is when we connect

to unconnected things and attribute cause - a spoken spell causes a patronus to appear, or a drink makes someone fall in love.

When you hear someone argue that science disproves God, *this* is the sort of God they're talking about. The God of magical thinking. We used to think God caused rain, but now we understand the water cycle. We used to think God caused the seasons, but now we understand that the earth is tilted on its axis, and as we orbit the sun, different parts of our planet are closer or further away.

And so on and so on. If we understand religion purely in terms of magical thinking, then atheists are right: science isn't going to leave any room for God.

But from the beginning, the witness of the Scriptures hasn't been concerned primarily with magical thinking. Oh, it's in there - after all, the books of the Bible are products of their times, and they were written by folks who definitely believed in magical thinking.

But what we see over and over in Scripture - what we see, in fact, from start to finish, is a much larger focus on *relational* thinking. In other words, when confronted with the miracle of life - of you and me and how we relate to each other, our response has been to insist that this must come from something, *someone* bigger than ourselves.

There are lots of scientific ways to explain how humans developed our relational capacity. If you're a science nerd like me, they're pretty fascinating. But there's a different way for us to explore and celebrate our relationality as well - through story and poetry. And this is the realm of religion.

So what I want to do today is take a whirlwind journey from the beginning to the end of Scripture. If you've been around Catalyst for a while, most of these Scriptures will be pretty familiar for you. That's intentional - we're opening Epiphany with a big-picture look at the *why* of life. What's our purpose? Not *how* did we get here - the scientific question (again, super interesting just not our focus).

What Scripture affirms from beginning to end - and what is crystallized in Jesus himself - is that God created us *for* relationship. We are most human when we are in deep, authentic, meaningful relationships.

[Scripture Slide 1] We're going to begin at the beginning (well, almost). Genesis 2 is the second creation story - following the creation poem of Genesis 1 we'll be touching on later in this series. In this story, God is really hands on - God plants, shapes. God gets God's hands dirty. And God creates humans to join God in this dirty work. Let's take a look at a few key verses. Pay attention as we read to how tactile this passage is:

When the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, neither wild plants nor grains were growing on the earth. For the LORD God had not yet sent rain to water the earth, and there were no people to cultivate the soil. Instead, springs came up from the ground and watered all the land. Then the LORD

God formed the human from the dust of the ground. He breathed the breath of life into the human's nostrils, and the human became a living person.

Then the LORD God planted a garden in Eden in the east, and there he placed the human he had made. The LORD God made all sorts of trees grow up from the ground—trees that were beautiful and that produced delicious fruit. In the middle of the garden he placed the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. -- Genesis 2:4b-9

Did you catch all that? God shaped the first human out of the ground - the image here is of a sculptor shaping clay. God scoops up some mud and shapes a person. And then God takes that person to a particular spot and shows the person how to garden - God plants Eden.

And *then* comes the really cool part: God invites that first human to join in with God. To imitate God. Like a parent teaching a child. Like a master leading an apprentice.

The point? Creation is relational. When those ancient Hebrews looked around at our world, they marveled. They felt drawn to one another, and the world pointed them toward a great mystery at the heart of all things. That mystery wanted a relationship with them.

[Scripture Slide 2] Turn with me to John 1. The relational nature of God is a consistent theme throughout the history of the Hebrew people - who eventually became the nation of Israel. At the heart of their identity is their confession that God is their creator. When they say "creator," they're speaking primarily in *relational* terms. No matter where they live, no matter who is king, no matter what language they grew up speaking, what makes them a nation is that God chose them and they worship God.

When we get to the New Testament, to the world of Jesus, those first Christians - who were Jewish - understood Jesus to be God in the flesh (what we just celebrated at Christmas). In other words, it was their relational God taking their relationality to a whole new level. John's Gospel (which we were in a bit during Advent) says it best. And in case you weren't sure whether this connects with the Jewish creation stories, John makes it *very* explicit in the opening of his story of Jesus (who is the divine WORD):

In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God...

He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God. So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son. -- John 1:1, 9-14

The Word becomes human. And he shows us the Father. Jesus shows us who God truly is - the one who becomes one of us. Why? To make it possible for us to become God's own children. Jesus' mission is

what God's mission has been from the beginning: to be with us. Everything Jesus does, including his death and resurrection are to

[Scripture Slide 3] Our last stop is at the end of the Revelation - turn with me to chapter 21. This is the closing of the book, where we see the Revelator's poetic vision of the end. What I hope you note as we read through this passage is that this is not a wholly new thing. John draws here on the long story of Scripture to illustrate that Jesus is the one bringing about not something new, but something as old as humanity: God with us.

I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, "Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever."

And the one sitting on the throne said, "Look, I am making everything new!" And then he said to me, "Write this down, for what I tell you is trustworthy and true." And he also said, "It is finished! I am the Alpha and the Omega—the Beginning and the End. To all who are thirsty I will give freely from the springs of the water of life. All who are victorious will inherit all these blessings, and I will be their God, and they will be my children..."

Then the angel showed me a river with the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. It flowed down the center of the main street. On each side of the river grew a tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, with a fresh crop each month. The leaves were used for medicine to heal the nations.

No longer will there be a curse upon anything. For the throne of God and of the Lamb will be there, and his servants will worship him. And they will see his face, and his name will be written on their foreheads. And there will be no night there—no need for lamps or sun—for the Lord God will shine on them. And they will reign forever and ever. -- Revelation 21:3-7, 22:1-5

Revelation ends where Genesis began: God and humanity, living together on Earth, in a garden, with the Tree of Life. Only now, the garden has become a city. All of human civilization is honored here - all the cultivating we've done since the beginning finds its place. And we see that this End is not the End but an ending, and also a beginning. For in this End, God and humanity are together, for eternity. We have the rest of forever to continue to cultivate together.

So friends, here at the beginning of the year, as we celebrate the God who wants to be known and became human so that we could know God, we begin with this simple insistence:

You matter.

You are not an accident.

There is a deep mystery at the heart of all things, the so far beyond our words that we settle for the word 'God'. This divine mystery wants to know you. This divine mystery wants to be known.

It doesn't matter how old you are. The divine mystery is eternal.

It doesn't matter what race you are. The divine mystery revels in our diversity.

It doesn't matter what your first language is. The divine mystery is before and beyond all our words.

It doesn't matter what your orientation is. The divine mystery loves us and teaches us how to love.

It doesn't matter whether you're religious or not. The divine mystery is before and beyond our religions (and inhabits our faith).

What matters is you. And me. We. We matter. We matter because the divine mystery is present to us all.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] The divine mystery makes themselves known to us at this table.

1. Where in my life do I have a strong sense of purpose?
2. Where do I feel lost, adrift or listless?
3. How can I make space to rest with God this week?

Assignment + Blessing

Prayer with Jesus this week