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The Baptism of Our Lord

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“And God said, ‘Let there be Light’”

(Genesis 1:1-5)

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“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1).

Collect of the Day

Father in heaven, at the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River You proclaimed Him Your beloved Son and anointed Him with the Holy Spirit. Make all who are baptized in His name faithful in their calling as Your children and inheritors with Him or everlasting life; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

In 1966 the famous astronomer Carl Sagan announced there are two important criteria for a planet to be able to support life. First it needs to be near the right kind of star, and second, the planet needs to be the right distance from that star. If the orbit is too close, the planet will boil and will not be able to support life. If it's too far, the planet will freeze. There are roughly an octillion number of planets in the universe (an octillion is 1 followed by 24 zeroes). Therefore Sagan calculated there should be about a septillion planets in the universe capable of supporting life. A septillion is 1 followed by 21 zeroes. Said another way, there should be an awful lot of planets out there that can sustain life.

With such spectacular odds in life's favor, the race was on to discover intelligent life outside of our own solar system. Congress appropriated public funds, NASA participated, various universities launched efforts, the Soviets got in on the act. Armed with various and sundry equipment, scientists all around the world started listening for signs of intelligent life (particularly for communications) and many were confident something would soon show up. Years passed, and the silence from the rest of the universe was deafening. In 1993 Congress cut off the spigot of public funds, yet scientists at Harvard and the University of California, Berkeley and many others continue on with the search. As of today no evidence of extraterrestrial life has been discovered. Zilch. Zero followed by a whole lot of zeros!

What happened? We have learned in the past fifty

years there are many more factors necessary for life than Sagan had supposed. His two parameters, being near the right star at the right distance, grew to 10, and then to 20, and then to 50. That meant the number of planets that could potentially sustain life as we know it plummeted to a few thousand planets. But it continued to plummet, because additional parameters necessary to support life as we know it continued to be discovered. Eventually, the number of possible planets among the octillion out there hit zero and kept going down. In other words, not only were the odds not in favor of a planet being able to support life. The odds turned against any planet in the universe supporting life, including this one. Probability says we shouldn't be here.

In 1966, Sagan said there were two conditions necessary for a planet to support life. Today, scientists say there are more than 200 – every single one of which must be perfectly met. If any one of those 200 is not perfectly met, the whole thing falls apart. You don't have just a dysfunctional planet. You have a dead planet.

Here's one of those 200 parameters. For a planet to sustain life, you need another planet nearby, one that is much larger and has much more mass . . . something like in our solar system a planet called Jupiter. The more mass, the greater the gravitational pull. So in our solar system Jupiter is like a giant vacuum cleaner sucking up asteroids, or at least diverting them away from earth. Without Jupiter, earth would be pummeled by asteroids and would be unable to support life.

David wrote in Psalm 19, “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the sky proclaims his handiwork” (v. 1). When David looked up on a clear night, he praised God for ordering the cosmos so beautifully. We can utter the same note of praise today because the odds against life as we know it in the universe are simply astonishing.

Yet here we are, and the big question is “why?” What can account for it? Can every one of those 200 plus parameters have been perfect by accident? At what point is it fair to admit that science suggests we cannot be the result

of random forces?

Today the atheism of many scientists is being rattled . . . by science, because they realize the conditions for life on earth are just a little too perfect. For many well respected scientists, to dismiss it all as a happy accident seems intellectually lazy and actually requires more faith than it does to believe in a Creator. Many good scientists are beginning to sound like believers, not in spite of their scientific research, but precisely because of it. Robert Griffiths, a physicist at Stanford University wrote, “If we need an atheist for a debate, I go to the philosophy department. The physics department isn’t much use.” [I’m indebted to a Wall Street Journal article: “Science Increasingly Makes the Case for God”, Erick Metaxas, 12/26/14).

“Bereshit bara Elohim et hashamayim ve’et ha’arets.” Those ancient Hebrew words are the starting point for the Scriptures, and the starting point for our faith. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” We don’t begin with scientific arguments for the existence of God. We don’t start with philosophical arguments. We start with the Word of God, and that Word starts with a simple breath-taking truth: “In the beginning God . . .” Then follows the wonderful account of creation . . . beginning with matter out of nothingness, created, not made.

Our text says, “The earth was formless and void.” The Hebrew for formless and void has a little rhyme to it: “tohu wa-bohu”. (I remember it because one of my professors criticized a classmate’s paper as being tohu wa-bohu. He wrote it in Hebrew right next to a very bad grade on the title page!) But in Genesis 1 the Lord takes all that is tohu wa-bohu , all that is formless and void, and starts organizing it, bringing form and order and elegance and wisdom to it.

“Let there be light” and there was light. Inanimate objects come first. “Let the waters be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear. . . “Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seeds and trees bearing

fruit.”

Then when the earth is ready for them, the Lord starts filling it with animate beings. “Let the waters swarm with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens. . . Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds – livestock and creeping things and beasts of the earth.”

Finally, when all else was ready, then comes the pinnacle of his creation: “Let us make man in our image. . . and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth. . . And the LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it.” Of course, to keep something doesn’t mean to pillage, pollute, poison and exhaust. It means to take loving, responsible care of it and then pass it on intact to the next generation. We like to think that if all else fails we can always find a new home somewhere else in space, but odds of finding something suitable, something even remotely like this beautiful earth, those odds are not good.

In any event, back to the beginning. “In the beginning God . . .” *Our* starting point is God and the strong, authoritative Word he speaks.

God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light. Notice he called it into being with his Word. His Word is “performative.” It does not merely state something. It accomplishes it; it brings it about. “Let there be light” and there was light. “Lazarus, come forth!” and immediately the dead man came out. “Quiet! Be still!” and the raging sea became like glass.

His Word created the heavens and the earth, “for without him was nothing made that has been made” (Jn. 1:3). His Word healed the sick and expelled demons and raised the dead. His Word also creates saving faith. Paul writes “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). Similarly, in Isaiah 55, the Lord says, “As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields

seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (vv. 10).

God’s Word creates saving faith. Science can’t do that. Of late, science seems inadvertently to be knocking down some of the barriers to faith that man has constructed for himself. But science will never prove the existence of God; science cannot create faith in us. Only God’s Word can do that and create something out of nothing.

And you have that Word. Deuteronomy 30, “It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will ascend to heaven to get it and proclaim it to us? . . . No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart” (v. 12ff).

The word is very near you. It’s in the Bible in the seat back of the chair in front of you. It’s in the hymnal on the chair next to you. It’s in the heart of the person sitting near you, those verses and truths she once memorized and now owns for herself. It’s in your mouth whenever you read God’s Word or confess the truths of his Word. It’s in the bible studies held here in our church and in members’ homes. The Word is in the classrooms of our school, and not just when religion is being taught, but also in music, and Spanish and science and literature.

Deuteronomy 30 says we don’t have to go up to the heavens to find God’s Word. The Word is very near you because it’s been given you. Better said it’s been unleashed, because that Word is not static or passive, but “living and active, sharper than any two-edge sword” (Heb. 4:12). Timothy wrote it “is breathed out by God”, inspired we say. It is therefore powerful. The psalmist says “It shatters the cedars of Lebanon . . . (Ps. 29).” It’s also sweet. Ezekiel 3, “Son of man, eat this scroll . . . So I ate it and it tasted as sweet as honey” (v.3ff). Jesus once said you cannot live by bread alone. To really live you’re going to need the word that comes from the mouth of God (Mt. 4:4).

Without God’s authoritative Word, we have *tohu wa-bohu*. Without God’s Word, we have and are formless and

void. Without God's Word, there is no life, physical or spiritual, no light, no land, no love of God.

But with God's Word, we have light and land and lilies and lamas and ladybugs. With God's Word we have the kind of light that travels at a 186,000 miles a second in a vacuum, but also the kind of light that is the Light of the World" (Jn. 8:12), Jesus, who illuminates our darkness and chases it away. Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians, "God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). Thanks be to God. Amen

Just a note: part of my goal today was to show it is not at all irrational to believe in the existence of God. Next weekend, I am not preaching, but the following weekend I hope to show it is not at all irrational to believe more specifically in Jesus as God's Son, our Savior. So, two doses of Christian apologetics, one today, and the next the weekend of January 24th and 25th. All skeptics are welcome. Think about inviting one.

