

NASA, EONS, AND BURIALS

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on Easter Sunday, March 27, 2016

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Three Unusual Perspectives on Life

A couple of weeks ago, we looked very closely at one of the most famous verses in the Bible, in the New Testament at least, John 14: 6, where Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” But we looked at it from the point of view of Aramaic, which is Jesus’ mother tongue. And the “I am” is the name of God, so Jesus was saying that “God is the way, and the truth and the life.”

Now I’d like to look at that third part today, the life, for our Easter celebration this morning. I’d like to look at it seriously, as seriously as I’m able to do it. Actually I’m going to take it a bit literally, which is not my usual habit when looking at scriptural text.

But wanting to look at this quotation seriously, that God is Life, I need to tell you I’m not speaking of life with a small “l” that’s all around us. You’ve got a potted plant, and it lives for a while and then eventually it dies.

But then you also have Life with a capital “L.” Jesus is saying, “God is Life.” Life is divinity.

So in that context of the divinity of Life on an Easter Sunday, I’d like to look at three admittedly unusual perspectives about this approach: one from the point of view of NASA’s mission to Mars, one from the point of view of deep time, and one from the point of view of funerals.

NASA’s Mars Problem; Defining Life Is Beyond Top Scientists

We’ll have fun this morning.

A couple years ago, NASA had a mission to Mars and sent this little Rover with the cute name of “Curiosity” to land on Mars and to crawl around, to take soil samples, to look for water, and carry out all sorts of different experiments. But one of the things that it was to do was to look for life. Is there a possibility of life on Mars?

Well, the NASA people, the powers that be, decided, “You know, how will we know if Curiosity finds life? Maybe we should define life so that, if this little Rover finds it, we’ll know that it really is life.” So they called together top scientists from around the country. They flew nearly a dozen of them to the Houston headquarters and said, “Can you help us define what life is? So therefore, if Curiosity finds it, we’ll know what we’ve got.”

These folks started gathering, and I’ll save you a long story and make it short. The short version is they had to give up. These renowned scientists could not settle upon a definition of life. I’m not kidding. They could not. A guy by the name of Daniel Koshland was on this panel to help figure out what life is. He was interviewed later. Here is a paragraph from the interview:

“What is the definition of life? I remember a conference of the scientific

elite that sought to answer that question. Is an enzyme alive? Is a virus alive? Is a cell alive? After many hours of launching promising balloons that defined life in a sentence, followed by equally conclusive punctures of these balloons, a solution seemed at hand:

“ ‘The ability to reproduce — that is the essential characteristic of life,’ said one statesman of science. Everyone nodded in agreement that the essential of life was the ability to reproduce, until one small voice was heard that said this: ‘Then one rabbit is dead. Two rabbits — a male and a female — are alive, but either one alone is dead.’ ”

Daniel E. Koshland,
The Seven Pillars of Life

Every Balloon Gets Punctured

For every example, for every balloon the scientists put up, for every definition they settled on, at least one, and sometimes half-a-dozen counterexamples existed.

And one of the main ones was this: It’s a computer program, of all things, called cellular automata. What you have is a couple mathematical equations that define a mathematical entity that crawls around within a defined mathematical space. These little mathematical entities crawl around, and, if they encounter a littler one, they absorb it. If they get too big, they split, and after a while they call it quits. Is that life? It certainly fits most of our definitions.

Something fascinating about the fact that these scientific “elite” had to “give up” on the definition of life is what that implies. I can’t prove it, but one of the implications of this

failure is that life isn’t a matter of 1 or 0. The switch is not on or off. Something is not alive or dead. Here’s your live potted plant, and over there is a dead rock.

Instead, life is more of a continuum, which philosophically links us to other kinds of continuums. Like divinity, not confined to space or time. Like consciousness, not confined to space or time.

Now We Turn to Deep Time; 7 Generations = 3 Sec. on the Clock of Life

Okay, that’s a little bit of the NASA story. Now we turn to deep time. It’s nearly impossible to get a feeling for it, but let me introduce a ratio for you:

If you consider first yourself and then your parents and then your grandparents and then your great-grandparents and then go back to yourself and consider possibly children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. That’s seven generations. There are some of us who have known great-great-grandparents and great-great-grandchildren.

So basically there are seven generations from your great-grandparents, whether you knew them or not, to your great-grandchildren, whether you get a chance to see them or not. Seven generations compared to life on earth is equal to three seconds of a year.

$$\frac{7 \text{ generations of humans}}{3.5 \text{ B years of life on earth}} = \frac{3 \text{ sec.}}{1 \text{ year}}$$

That span of seven generations compared to life on earth of an estimated 3.5 billion years is basically — 1 thousand one, 1 thousand two, 1 thousand three — three seconds of an entire year. Life has been on earth for a long time. Ninety-nine point nine percent of all the species that have swum, walked, flown,

or crawled upon this planet are extinct, meaning that zero-point-one percent — the millions of species now existent upon this planet — represents that 0.1 percent that is alive now.

This Is not Just a Science Lesson

“God is Life,” Jesus said. Life is divine. It’s hard to get a feeling for this as well: The black depths of the ocean, miles deep, harbor living creatures. There is life in the cold, thin upper atmosphere, where it ranges between 100 and 140 degrees below zero. There’s life in the myriad seeds waiting for water, sometimes for as long as a decade in the burning sand. But as soon as it rains, they sprout and bloom.

There’s life in the bacteria in drops of water sealed in salt for 10,000 years. One of the professors at Binghamton University reconstitutes bacteria that have been dormant in black salt for 10,000 years. Release it, give it a little bit of agar, and it grows, completely alive. There are diatoms in every single drop of the ocean. There are cells of various types feeding and then reproducing pretty much as soon as volcanic lava cools on the land. Life waxes and wanes as the niches come and go over geological time.

Can we really try to understand the persistence of life? I’m amazed by its virility, resilience, flexibility, prolificacy, lushness, ubiquity, fecundity. God is Life. It is infused with divinity.

So NASA, Deep Time, and now Deep Six

A job that I dearly loved back when I was in high school was work at a large cemetery. One day we needed to dig a grave where there wasn’t quite enough room. There was an old grave here, another old grave there, and we needed to dig this new grave in the middle.

But one of the two had been dug in the wrong place by a few inches, and there wasn’t quite enough room. So the backhoe is in there scooping out the dirt. Now on a backhoe there are two little wheels and two big ones. I’m standing right by one of the big wheels because the operator can’t see very well down deep into the whole. So I’m helping to guide him because the space was so tight and narrow.

Well sure enough, the machine slips. The operator makes a slight mistake, and he whacks the vault next to the hole. By this time the hole was dug significantly below that vault. He smacks it, and the vault was very brittle. The concrete just fell apart, and the next thing you know, there was a hole much bigger than a basketball, and out fell the remains.

I still remember the thought I had when I saw what had happened. What I saw looked like compost. Out it poured, this really good dirt, with a few large bones tumbling down on top of the dirt that hadn’t yet fully decomposed. I went and looked at the headstone. This guy was buried 30 years ago.

This is a side of life that we tend to ignore. You don’t often hear graveyard humor preached on Easter Sunday. Well think about it for a moment. I’m going to move from a human to a tree.

The Other Half of Life, The Other Half of the Story

If you’ve ever walked through an old forest, and all of us have, I’m sure, and there’s a tree that fell down several years ago. It’s been lying there for a while. What will you see?

You’ll see many different mosses, extraordinarily beautiful mosses of various kinds on top of that log that’s been there for a number of years. You will see fungi. You will prob-

ably see, if you look closely, a hundred different species of fungi, some of them popping up through the moss, or, if you lift up a piece of bark and look under it, you'll find slime molds and other kinds of fungi.

You'll also see mollusks, tiny snails and slugs, some big slugs too. If the tree is wet, you will find algae. There will be a sheen of algae over every portion that is wet and gets some sunshine, competing with the mosses.

And you will find countless little insects, all different types. Ants and termites, perhaps, and all these nameless little guys are buzzing around, feeding, and enjoying life. Centipedes, millipedes that go scurrying away as soon as you lift up that piece of bark. And then, largely unseen but underneath it all, are many, many worms.

In a sense, this is the other half of life. It is the other half of the story. Over the months and years, watch what happens to that log.

Printed in the Bulletin, you will find on page 6 an ancient symbol, the Celtic tree of life. I included the Celtic tree because it's an archetypal symbol, one of the few that gives equal space to what goes below ground as well as what happens above ground. All of our attention is usually on the leaves and the tree and the fruit, and not so much on what happens below ground.

But this is Easter Sunday, and we have this notion that God is Life. That God raised Jesus from the dead. We have this old log lying there, thrivingly alive as it feeds a whole other class of living things.

We Looked at NASA, Deep Time, Deep Six; now Moving from Jesus to Christ

There's a marvelous text found in the Book of Acts, 2:32, 36: On the day of Pentecost,

after recognizing the presence of the Holy Spirit, Peter stood up and proclaimed that God "had raised up Jesus" to reveal him as the Christ. This is a different way of thinking for most of us. Most of us tend to think of Jesus Christ as though it's his first name and last name. But no, "Christ" is a title, not a surname. It is a much older and larger frame than just the name "Jesus."

It is this Christ who meets Paul on the road to Damascus. The Jesus that you and I hear about on Sunday morning, that we think about now and then, that we participate in, are graced by, and are redeemed by is also the cause then that becomes the eternal Christ.

This makes the notion of resurrection a lot easier to imagine. Jesus' resurrection is not just a one-time miracle that happens to one lucky dead guy but rather is a drama to focus our attention on a presence that has always been available from the beginning, a presence unlimited by space or time and is now revealed.

If you or I had been present at the resurrection, what would we have seen? Was there a big flash of light like a lightning bolt? Or was there a glow where you could see the light coming through the cracks as the stone was there in front of the tomb? The presence, which was captured in finite form, was the body of Jesus, revealed to be an infinite omnipresence. He moved from Jesus to Christ, which now surrounds in its sweep all of creation, including you and me. He moved from Jesus to Christ.

The Mystery of Christ Is Revealed

The mystery therefore of Christ is revealed! Seeing the spiritual and the material coexisting is the hallmark of Christ in any moment, in any event, in any person.

God's hope for history is that humanity will one day be able to recognize its dignity and its divine dwelling place, which it shares with all of creation. We're still living in the in-between now, slowly edging forward, with lots of back-pressure, lots of resistance. As it says in Romans 8: 22-23, creation is "groaning" in anticipation.

But in the meantime:

- NASA still is forced to admit that life is not easily limited, not easily confined, and certainly not to be defined.
- We can look back over our shoulder and see 3.5 billion years of life, just

on this one planet in all of its virility, resilience, flexibility, prolificacy, lushness, ubiquity, fecundity, and now we can also add divinity.

- There is a Circle of Life, and the death of an individual is just simply moving to a different place on this circle, and that has nothing to do with Life in its eternal divinity, which remains serenely unperturbed.

Jesus said, "God is Life." I think it comes to mean a lot more than I had ever imagined.

He Is Risen Indeed!

Amen.