

# SAYING LESS, SEEING MORE

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs  
Preached on the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, June 26, 2016

*In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

## Looking Is the Key to Finding

Let me begin with a silly story that's borderline stupid. A Sufi master named Mullah Nasruddin was searching for something outside of his house. Some people came along and asked, "What are you looking for?" He answered, "My key." "Well, where did you lose it?" "In the house." "Why are you looking out here?" And he replied, "Well, there is more light out here." A foolish story. Not very meaningful.

However, this story was told to a Zen master, who listened to it, pondered for a while, and finally was inspired, "Ah! So looking is the key."

The theme today is one of the aspects of the interrelationship of science and religion. I haven't done science in a while and sort of felt the need. Today's the day. Following the stupid story, I'd like to continue with one of my favorite quotes of all time.

Back when I was first becoming interested in the dialogue of science and religion, I came across a book from the early Twentieth Century called *Physics and Philosophy*, by Werner Heisenberg, he of the famous "Uncertainty Principle." If you are studying an electron, you can either know where it is or how fast it's going, but you can't know both at the same time. In that book, Heisenberg observed, "The first gulp from the glass of natural sciences will turn you into an atheist,

but at the bottom of the glass, God is waiting for you." Now you know why I like it.

Consider this remark from Robert Jastrow. He was the first chairman of NASA's Lunar Exploration Committee, which decided on the goals of the entire set of Apollo missions. Later he ended up as chief of the Theoretical Division of NASA, and after that he became the founding director of NASA's Goddard Institute on Space Studies until his retirement in 1981.

## Scientists Preceded by Theologians

Jastrow related this witty epigram. Needless to say, some of his friends were not amused.

"For the scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance, he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries."

Now let me tell you a somewhat longer story about science, about background radiation and the confirmation of the Big Bang.

In 1960 the Bell Telephone Laboratories in Holmdel, New Jersey, assembled arguably one of the finest concentrations of scientific geniuses the world has ever known. They constructed a large dish-like antenna, similar to the one at Arecibo in Puerto Rico

but not nearly as large. Its intended use was to listen for radio signals from between galaxies, and the antenna was named Echo.

### **Static Outwits Echo**

By 1962, however, it was discovered that new technology had advanced enough to make the antenna obsolete, so it was put to other uses. Two employees of the Labs, Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson, took over this antenna to measure faint radio signals between distant galaxies.

But when the two researchers started using the antenna, they found it produced a whole lot of static all the time. No matter where they pointed Echo in the sky, it produced static-like noise that made it difficult to detect the subtle signals they were hoping to hear.

Penzias and Wilson then began a painstaking process of systematically going through all of the electronic equipment being used to control the antenna and listen to the signals, looking for the source of the static. They came up completely empty of clues.

Finally, they decided to expand their search. There had been some nuclear tests in 1962. Could there be radio active elements in the air that were responsible for the static that the antenna was producing? They even looked for pigeons nesting somewhere in the antenna or its equipment. Nothing showed up.

Still in 1962 but about ready to discard the antenna because it was proving to be worthless, Penzias and Wilson complained about the static. Listening to them was a Princeton University physicist by the name of Robert Dicke, who

was more theoretically inclined than the two frustrated scientists.

### **Echo Outwits Static**

He had published a paper suggesting that the universe began in the distant past as a primal explosion of unimaginable proportions that would then reverberate throughout the universe and throughout time. He calculated that such a massive release of energy had occurred that reverberation would show up as microwave radiation sounding a lot like static.

Only after the three shared their findings with one another did they realize the source of the static and what they had discovered. Rather than listening for signals between galaxies, they had discovered background radiation that was the lingering echo of an ancient explosion! The aftermath of what is now called the Big Bang is considered part of the Standard Model of creation.

In 1978, Penzias and Wilson received the Nobel Prize for their work.

There's a coincidence and also an irony about this story. The coincidence is that the antenna, when it was first built in 1960, was named Echo. And that's what it heard, the continuing echo from the birth of the universe so long ago.

The irony is that the key to one of the major discoveries within the fields of physics and science of the Twentieth Century was that the evidence for it was so obvious, so in our face, that it was ignored for many years until Penzias and Wilson realized what it was.

Okay, so we have included a quote from Heisenberg, another quote from Robert Jastrow, and this story of the Big Bang. All this is

lead-up to that scriptural passage in Romans, which is difficult, especially if you take it seriously.

**Saint Paul:** “Ever since the creation of the world, his [God’s] invisible nature — namely, his eternal power and deity — has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.”

### **Has God’s Eternal Power Been Truthful?**

The question I’d like to pose to you about this quote from Romans is: Seriously? Is it really true? Is it mostly true? Is it sort of true? Does it have some truth in it? Is it characterized by truthiness? Or is it mostly BS? “Ever since the creation of the world, God’s invisible nature — namely, God’s power and deity — has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.”

I’m biased on this. I tend to think that quote from Saint Paul is completely true. I’m biased because I did not come to the faith through the Bible. The Bible for me was intriguing but not compelling. I didn’t come to the faith through the witness of my parents, my peer group, or my church. But the witness, rather, of magnets and photons traveling through slits is what brought me to the faith, with Heisenberg being the cherry on top.

The whole point of my sermon this morning is to encourage you, maybe for the first time in your lives, to take that verse completely seriously. When we look out into our world, no matter what our eyes land upon at the moment, we must learn that the eternal nature of God is communicated through the way in which we engage in our world.

### **We Need the Mosquito, the Joy, the Breath**

Now let me shift just slightly on this. Charlotte Beck, a spiritual teacher, has a quote that

you’ll sometimes find on posters, where she says, “Life always gives us exactly what we need at every moment.” This sounds nice, pious, cute, comforting, perhaps, except that she continues:

“Life always gives us exactly what we need at every moment.

“This includes every mosquito, every misfortune, every red light, every traffic jam, every obnoxious supervisor (or employee), every illness, every loss, every moment of joy or depression, every addiction, every piece of garbage, every breath.”

She concludes:

“Every moment is the guru.  
Every moment is our teacher.”

Now I’m going to put the three thoughts together. Ponder this for a moment because there’s an intertwining thread through them all.

**Saint Paul:** “Every aspect of creation points to God and the understanding of divine nature.”

**Charlotte Beck:** “Every facet of your lives, good or bad, is your teacher in godly things.”

**Werner Heisenberg:** “At the bottom of the glass, at the bottom of it all, is divinity.”

I can’t tell you how hard this lesson is. And I would be doing you a disservice to white-wash it for you. It is hard. And you will fail somewhere between a hundred and a thousand times for every success that you have.

Just imagine for a moment: *Every single facet of your life is especially created by God to be your spiritual teacher for that moment, every mosquito, every red light, every kiss,*

every smile, every cookie. All of them. We all know that the negative things can be powerful teachers in our lives because we can learn to surmount them.

### **But Everything?**

If you're having trouble with this sermon at this point, you're not alone. Rest assured, I am too. My hypocrisy meter is somewhere between 80-90 percent on this one. This is definitely one of those sermons that cautions, Do as I say, not as I do. How can we possibly consider that every facet of life is our teacher. No, no, no! There are good things and there are bad things. Everybody knows that.

What I'm here to tell you this morning is not "Everybody knows that." The spiritual masters of the ages have said instead, "No, it's all good."

**Julian of Norwich:** "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." We tend to judge

prematurely and wrongly and prejudicially. Actually, we shouldn't judge at all. It's all good.

### **God's Lessons Are Hard to Miss**

But some of God's lessons are so pervasive, so consistent, so blatant, so in-your-face that they're hard to miss:

**Saint Paul:** "Ever since the creation of the world, God's invisible nature — namely, God's eternal power and deity — has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made."

**Charlotte Beck:** "Life always gives us exactly what we need at every moment. Every moment is the guru."

**Werner Heisenberg:** "The first gulp from the glass of natural sciences will turn you into an atheist. We've all seen it a hundred times. But at the bottom of the glass, God is waiting for you."

So therefore, perhaps "Looking is the key."

*Amen.*