Title: The Birthing of a Universe

Psalm 8 O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger. When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

1 Corinthians 15:41 There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; indeed, star differs from star in glory.

Psalm 148:1-3 Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise God in the heights! Praise God, all their angels; praise God, all their hosts! Praise God, sun and moon; praise God all you shining stars!

**Sermon:**

During Advent, we are contemplating the mystery of The Stars, the Christ Child, & the Cosmos. Julia wrote in her advent all-church email: “God's love was with the world from the first moments of the big bang, at every stage of its unfolding and evolution, and in the cry of every new-born child. This year our collective consciousness became filled with awesome photos from deep space, thanks to the James Webb Space Telescope -- images of the cosmos caring for and birthing stars and galaxies in nurseries and the breathtaking beauty of the last dance of a dying star. How do these new images enhance our faith, especially during Advent? How can a conversation between the mystery of God's vast multiverse and the tenderness of the birth of Jesus enhance our faith?

I’ve heard from many of you how much this theme means to you! It means a great deal to me also!

When I transitioned out of religious fundamentalism, some of my mentors were Matthew Fox, Brian Swimme, Thomas Berry, and Michael Dowd who introduced me to the “new cosmology,” a branch of physics and metaphysics dealing with the nature of the universe.

These authors helped me appreciate how the Universe Story is foundational to the Christian Story, how the Christian story is informed by and embedded in the Universe Story.

In 2008, when I was pursuing “privilege of call,” the Wisconsin Conference UCC invited me to write a statement of Christian beliefs as a prerequisite for ordination, I looked at each topic of theology through the lens of the Universe Story. I wrote my paper with the little book of the Scriptures in one hand, and the big book of the Universe in the other.

But I must give credit where credit is due! It was Michael Dowd’s paper “A Great Story Perspective on the UCC Statement of Faith,” (1990) that helped me most in pairing Christian theology with the Universe Story.

I love our Advent theme because it was the context for my introduction into the UCC.

(Pause)

Some of you will remember a wonderful DVD series we offered years ago called “Painting the Stars,” which envisions the future of evolutionary Christian spirituality.

The study guide for this series was written by evolutionary theologian Bruce Sanguin, who has become another of my mentors on the Universe Story.

Sanquin writes: Our Jewish/Christian ancestors assumed that Earth was young, perhaps six to ten thousand years old, that God had created all creatures in their finished form. A giraffe was surely an awesome creature in their eyes, but they had no way to understand that it actually took 13.8 billion years to produce a giraffe. They had no way of knowing that a giraffe’s stunning beauty represented the coalescence of elements forged in an exploding star, or that its long neck was shaped, in part, by the random mutation of genetic material that proved to be well adapted to its bioregion.

But now we know that 13.8 billion years ago, in a great flash, the universe flared forth into being, billowing out in every direction so that the elementary particles could stabilize, enabling the first atomic beings of hydrogen and helium to emerge. After a million turbulent years, the frenzied particles calmed themselves enough for the primeval fireball to dissolve into a great scattering, with all the atoms soaring away from each other into the dark cosmic skies. A billion years of uninterrupted night enabled the universe to prepare itself for its next macrocosmic transfiguration. In the depths of its silence, the universe shuddered with the immense creativity necessary to fashion one hundred billion galaxies, including our own Milky Way. These giant structures pinwheeled through the emptiness of space and swept up all the hydrogen and helium into self-organizing systems, and clusters of systems, and clusters of clusters of systems, each bringing forth from its own materials billions upon billions of primal stars.

I credit those details about the Big Bang and what followed to Brian Swimme & Thomas Berry, in a 30- year-old book I still love, called The Universe Story.\*\*

These authors continue: All the energy that would ever exist in the entire course of time erupted as a single quantum – a singular gift – existence. Each of the sextillion particles that foamed into existence had its root in this quantum vacuum, this originating reality. If in the future, stars would blaze, lizards would blink, or giraffes would roam the savannah, these actions would be powered by the same numinous energy that flared forth at the dawn of time.

From a faith perspective, we might assert that Love exploded everything into existence.

**Interconnectedness / Interbeing:**

The story of a single proton is integral with the story of every other particle in the primeval fireball. To tell the full story of a single particle we must tell the story of the universe, for each particle is in some way intimately present to every other particle in the universe.

One of the mythic treasures of Eastern Religions is Indra's net. Far away in the heavenly abode of the great god Indra, there is a wonderful net that stretches out infinitely in all directions, and has a single glittering jewel in each "eye" of the net. Since the net itself is infinite in dimension, the jewels are infinite in number. Any one jewel in the net reflects all the other jewels. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels, so that there is an infinite reflecting process occurring.

Reflecting on Indra’s Net, Buddhist Teacher Thich Nhat Hanh expounded, “There is no such thing as being, only interbeing.”

Nothing is itself without everything else. Each member of the Cosmic Community has its own proper role within the entire sequence of transformations that have given shape and identity to everything that exists.

**Humans!**

We humans can set our local selves within the context of a much larger creative process and realize that this process is, in a very real sense, living through us. The whole universe is alive in us!

No longer should we imagine ourselves as small, insignificant and separate beings. The illusion of separation dissolves as we realize an evidence-based mystical connection with All That Is. When we look out through a telescope at the starry night sky, we are looking, not so much *at* the universe, but rather *as* the universe. After 13.8 billion years of evolution, the divine is at work in the universe coming to expression *in* us, and *as* us.

As I light this candle, I invite you to repeat after me the words, “I am the universe, in human form, evolving.” Now close your eyes, and repeat the phrase a number of time silently, while holding your hand over your heart.

We are not separate from the creativity that produced us, but one with it. We are the creativity of the universe, after billions of years, in the radiant form of humans.

Matthew Fox describes the universe as a huge, living organism that has given birth to us.

Each of us is a manifestation of “the universe reflecting on itself,” which is for many of us the core of our spirituality. (“Healing,” by Michael Morwood).

So take another moment in silence to feel from the inside what it is like to be the presence of immense creativity showing up after 13.8 billion years as us, as you and me!

**Transitioning from Technozoic Era to Ecozoic Era:**

Psalm 8 which Jill read for us speaks of humans looking up at the heavens, the moon and stars, and feeling quite small and insignificant, but then coming to the realization that they aren’t so small and insignificant after all. They are crowned with glory and honor and have been given a very important job to do as stewards of God’s creation.

How well have we done our job? We may have to admit sadly that our mode of presence upon Earth in the 21st c. is destructive to the planetary community of life. For during the Industrial Era, we began to look at the planet as little more than a natural resource to convert into commodities. As Chief Seattle put it, “what your people call natural resources, our people call kin.”

We may live largely unaware that our own self-interest as a species is intimately and inextricably connected to the interests of the whole planet. We may proceed, economically, politically, and spiritually, as though Earth belongs to us, when in every conceivable way, the truth is the exact opposite: we belong to Earth. We are one strand in an ecosystem of interconnectedness and staggering complexity. Having lost this cosmological orientation, we may be enacting terror upon our one-Earth community. We need to come home to the cosmos.

Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry explain that there is a clearly a tension between those committed to the Technozoic Era and its continued exploitation of Earth as resource, and those committed to the Ecozoic Era, a new mode of human-Earth relations, one where the entire Earth community is the primary concern. In this Ecozoic Era, we need a movement beyond the United Nations to a United Species.

While we may be waking up to the damage we’ve done, others remain in ignorance and denial. While we challenge the dominant world view of exploitation of the Earth, many at the top of the political and economic pyramid respond with anger, fear, resistance, even violence.

Nevertheless, creation is waiting for the children of God to show up in their new and improved version, anticipated and made possible by Jesus, who laid down the evolutionary template for the emergence of the Ecozoic Era – a new manifestation of what it means to be human, to be an integral part of the one-Earth-community-of-interbeings, evolving together toward neighborliness.

What we are striving to do here at ORUCC is come to terms with the “new” cosmology that science has given us. We are attempting to incorporate into our theology, our liturgy, our hymnody, and our spiritual practices the evidence-based truth that we are expressions of a 13.8 billion year evolutionary process. We began our service today contemplating a dramatic image from the James Webb telescope, which reminded us of the story of our deep-time origins from a fireball. We are trying to ground some of our rituals in the truth that our bodies are constituted by the elements forged in an exploding star.

We evolutionaries are reminding one another that we carry the ancestors of our bacterial kin from 3.5 billion years ago in our gut, and that these little creatures set the oxygen levels for our planet by learning to metabolize what was once a poisonous gas. We are learning from indigenous people, who start every ceremony by recognizing, invoking, and expressing gratitude to “all our relations,” – our ancestors – which include the entire cosmos and all the kin creatures who gave us life.

We are endeavoring to help our people understand what Christ has to do with the stunning display of creativity known as evolution. Some theologians like Matthew Fox have been talking about a “Cosmic Christ” for decades, and now we are identifying Christ in that way, postulating Christ’s relationship with the evolutionary process, answering the call of the Cosmic Christ who is saving us from the illusion of separation from the universe, Earth, each other, and God.

It is the Cosmic Christ that animated Jesus of Nazareth, the one born in a manger, but who is also present in every atom, molecule, and cell. We interpret this evolutionary impulse, this numinous energy, this fire of Love that is awakening in us and through us, as the heart of Christ beating for the world.

The Cosmic Christ in me greets the Cosmic Christ in you. AMEN

\*\*The Universe Story was released 30 years ago. The scientists & mathematicians in our congregation will no doubt wish to update me on more recent discoveries.