

**“In the Beginning...”**  
A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan  
University Public Worship  
Stanford Memorial Church  
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The very first words of the Bible, in the book of Genesis, are “In the beginning.” That is, “In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void...”<sup>i</sup> The very first words of the gospel of John, in the New Testament are the same: “In the beginning.” John goes on to tell us that “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”<sup>ii</sup> What in the world is the Word, through which we’re told that all things came into being? Life has come into being through him as well as the light that cannot be overcome by darkness.<sup>iii</sup> Further on in the first chapter of John we learn that later “the Word became flesh and lived among” us as Jesus.<sup>iv</sup> Grace and truth then come to us through Jesus Christ.<sup>v</sup> What in the world does all this mean?

I think it can be explained, at least in part, by trying to answer these questions: What’s the nature of God, really? How does Jesus really relate to God? And how do we really relate to God and Jesus? I’d like to suggest that the answers come through four dimensions:<sup>vi</sup> First, we can think of God the infinite and the eternal, in the beginning and forever. Second, God can be seen as the law and order of the universe. Third, God can be understood as the spirit that infuses all of life. And fourth, in the human dimension, it may be said that God is love, personified in Jesus the Christ.

So, first of all, the Russian author Dostoevsky once explained that, ‘Man needs the unfathomable and the infinite just as much as he does the small planet which he inhabits.’”<sup>vii</sup> Simply in doing calculus—and building bridges and skyscrapers and airplanes—we routinely

assume notions of the infinitely large and infinitely small.<sup>viii</sup> The twentieth-century Russian mathematician Tobias Dantzig explained in his book *Number: The Language of Science* that “the importance of infinite processes for the practical exigencies of technical life can hardly be overemphasized. Practically all applications of arithmetic to geometry, mechanics, physics, and even statistics involve these processes directly and indirectly.”<sup>ix</sup> But does infinity actually exist? Mathematicians like Georg Cantor assumed that it does.<sup>x</sup> Others like Leopold Kronecker argued that this is utter nonsense.<sup>xi</sup>

But what does this all have to do with God? Well, Cantor spoke of an Absolute Infinite beyond numbers and called it God.<sup>xii</sup> God is the highest possible degree of totality or completeness. In terms of finite, rational thinking there is no way fully to construct, reach, or encompass God, just as finite standards do not apply to infinite numbers. But there may still be some partially meaningful ways to talk about God, just as we can talk about mathematical infinity.<sup>xiii</sup> Of course, none of this proves that God, the Infinite in space and time actually exists, but I came to find the story of the infinite in mathematics highly suggestive of something greater that’s going on in the cosmos.

The sociologist of religion Peter Berger has asked whether God has any reality outside of being a product of the human mind. The answer, he suggests, may be simply a matter of one’s frame of reference. What appears as a human projection in one case may appear as a reflection of transcendent reality in another. Still, it’s perfectly possible for both perspectives to coexist; the logic of the first does not preclude the potential reality of the second.<sup>xiv</sup> So, first of all, we can think of God as the infinite.

Secondly, God can be seen as the law and order of the universe itself. Charles Darwin wrote in his revolutionary book, *On the Origin of Species*, that “To my mind it accords better

with what we know of the laws impressed on matter by the Creator, that ... [we] view all beings not as special creations, but as the lineal descendants of some few beings which lived long before the first bed of the Silurian system was deposited...<sup>xv</sup> How clearly this scientist expressed his understanding that the Creator, God, in the beginning, generated universal laws, not only like the fixed law of gravity throughout the universe, but also like the laws of biological evolution that tie all of life on this planet earth together as a whole. At one level, it's amazing the universe coheres at all. Why are there established laws that apply everywhere and always, rather than having one thing happen here but then another there (gravity in America, but not in China), or something occur at this time but something else occur at another (genetic transmission now but not in the past)? The universe turns out not to be awry or askew in this way, though, but instead is ordered and trustworthy in some basic way. As Albert Einstein put it, "The most incomprehensible thing about the world is that it is comprehensible."<sup>xvi</sup> Einstein went on to say that he saw "God in the wonderful order and lawfulness of all that exists."<sup>xvii</sup>

Thirdly, we can go beyond the notion of God as natural law to God as some kind of spirit that infuses all of life and extends to the inanimate universe. The first prime minister of Israel, David Ben-Gurion, remembered discussing religion when he visited Einstein at Princeton in 1951. Even Einstein, "with his great formula about energy and mass, agreed that there must be something behind the energy."<sup>xviii</sup> Einstein also wrote in his personal "Credo" that "behind anything that can be experienced there is something...whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly."<sup>xix</sup> He regularly used terms like "cosmic religious feeling" or "awe" or "sense of the mysterious" to describe his response to it. He

explained that the response “is very difficult to elucidate to...anyone who is entirely without it.”<sup>xx</sup>

For me, it’s always been expressed most clearly by the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth through these lines in his poem, “Tintern Abbey:”

...I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things.<sup>xxi</sup>

Finally, fourthly, it can be said God is most clearly recognized in human life as the law of love. Mahatma Gandhi explained that, “Scientists tell us that without the presence of the cohesive force amongst the atoms that comprise this globe of ours, it would crumble to pieces and we would cease to exist; and even as there is cohesive force in blind matter, so must there be in all things animate, and the name for that cohesive force among animate things is Love. We notice it between father and son, between brother and sister, friend and friend. But we have to learn to use that force among all that lives, and in the use of it consists our knowledge of God.”<sup>xxii</sup> Gandhi’s perspective was that just as there are laws of nature operating in the universe at large so also are there within human psychology and culture. It’s the law of love

that's critical for humans to be aligned with in relations with each other; we deny or defy it at our peril.

Martin Luther King put it this way: “I still believe that love is the most durable power in the world. Over the centuries men have sought to discover the highest good...What is the *summum bonum* of life? I think I have discovered the highest good. It is love. This principle stands at the center of the cosmos. As John says, ‘God is love.’ He who loves is a participant in the being of God. He who hates does not know God.”<sup>xxiii</sup>

So, we can move beyond an impersonal understanding of God to one with a human dimension too. When we as people try to fathom infinite reality with our finite, human brains, it makes sense for us also to use language that is anthropomorphic—language that ascribes human characteristics to God. One of the greatest Christian theologians of the twentieth century, Paul Tillich, explained that an impersonal, objectifying term like “It” for God cannot grasp the center of our personalities as human beings. That pronoun doesn’t include the fullness of faith as a response of people’s whole personality: “[I]t cannot overcome our loneliness, anxiety, and despair,” and “this is the reason that the symbol of the personal God is indispensable for living religion.”<sup>xxiv</sup> For Christians, the personal God of love is best found manifest in Jesus of Nazareth, both as he was historically and as he continues to be manifested as a resurrected presence in our lives today.

My college chaplain, William Sloane Coffin used to say that, “When we see Jesus scorning the powerful, empowering the weak, healing the hurt, always returning good for evil, we are seeing transparently the power of God at work.”<sup>xxv</sup> Jesus also suffered like any other human—in fact much worse than most of us will ever know—so it’s possible to feel an

empathy and companionship with him that's virtually impossible with the infinite God of the natural order.

So, in summary, God can be understood fourfold as the infinite, as the natural law of the universe, as the spirit that infuses all of life, and finally as love – personified in Jesus.

The reading today from Psalm 147<sup>xxvi</sup> describes God as one who sends out his command to the earth of what I'd call natural law: to make the wind blow and the waters flow. But the Psalm also notes that God blesses children and declares ordinances within human life. The hymn we're about to sing proclaims, "Angels, from the realms of glory...As you sang creation's story, now proclaim Messiah's birth...God with us is now residing...Come and worship Christ, give thanks and sing."<sup>xxvii</sup>

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...All things came into being through him...in him was life, and the life was the light of all people...And the word became flesh and lived among us...full of grace and truth."<sup>xxviii</sup> Thanks be to God. Amen.

## **BENEDICTION**

For all who see God, may God go with you.

For all who embrace life, may life return your affection.

For all who seek a right path, may a way be found...

And the courage to take it, step by step. Amen.

Robert Mabry Doss

## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Genesis 1: 1-2.

<sup>ii</sup> John 1:1.

<sup>iii</sup> John 1: 3-5.

<sup>iv</sup> John 1:14.

<sup>v</sup> John 1:17.

<sup>vi</sup> What follows is a summary of chapter three of Scotty McLennan, *Jesus Was a Liberal: Reclaiming Christianity for All* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009).

<sup>vii</sup> As quoted in Theodosius Dobzhansky, *The Biology of Ultimate Concern* (New York: New American Library, 1967), p. 63.

<sup>viii</sup> See, for example, Rudy Rucker, *Infinity and the Mind: The Science and Philosophy of the Infinite* (Boston: Birkhauser, 1982), pp. 6-9.

<sup>ix</sup> Tobias Dantzig, *Number: The Language of Science* (New York: MacMillan, 1935), p. 112.

<sup>x</sup> Edward Kasner and James Newman, *Mathematics and the Imagination* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1940), pp. 61-62.

<sup>xi</sup> Raymond L. Wilder, *Introduction to the Foundations of Mathematics* (New York: John Wiley, 1965), pp. 202-203.

<sup>xii</sup> Georg Cantor, *Gesammelte Abhandlungen* (1932), p. 378, as cited in Rucker, *Infinity and the Mind*, p. 9.

<sup>xiii</sup> See Rucker, *Infinity and the Mind*, pp. 44-51.

<sup>xiv</sup> Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), p. 58.

<sup>xv</sup> Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (London: John Murray, 1859).

<sup>xvi</sup> As quoted in Theodosius Dobzhansky, *Mankind Evolving: The Evolution of the Human Species* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), p. xi.

<sup>xvii</sup> As cited in Max Jammer, *Einstein and Religion: Physics and Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 51.

<sup>xviii</sup> M. Pearlman, *Ben Gurion Looks Back* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1965), p. 217, as cited in Jammer, *Einstein and Religion*, p. 96.

<sup>xix</sup> Albert Einstein, "My Credo," (speech to the German League of Human Rights, Berlin, 1932), reproduced in Michael White and John Gribbin, *Einstein: A Life in Science* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1993), p. 263.

<sup>xx</sup> As quoted from Einstein's 1930 essay "Religion and Science" in Jammer, *Einstein and Religion*, p. 114.

<sup>xxi</sup> William Wordsworth, "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey on Revisiting the Banks on the Wye During a Tour. July 13, 1798," as collected in B.J. Whiting et al., *College Survey of English Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1942), vol. 2, p. 53.

<sup>xxii</sup> Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Collected Works*, as cited in Stephen Hay, ed., *Sources of Indian Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), vol. II, pp. 251-52.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., "The Most Durable Power," in James Melvin Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 11.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Paul Tillich, "The Idea of a Personal God," *Union Review* 2 (1940), pp. 8-10.



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<sup>xxv</sup> William Sloane Coffin, *Letter to a Young Doubter* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 204), p. 42.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Psalm 147: 12-20.

<sup>xxvii</sup> James Montgomery, "Angels, from the Realms of Glory" (hymn first published in England in 1816).

<sup>xxviii</sup> John 1: 1-4, 14.