

Rev. Phil Blackwell • Sunday, January 24, 2016
Text: Psalm 19; Luke 4:14-21

What's the Point?



**First United
Methodist Church**

DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD

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There are two National Football League playoff games today, a detail that may have fallen off of our calendars after the Packer loss last Saturday night. In at least one of the games I expect to see a wide receiver catch a long pass for a touchdown, raise a hand in praise to the heavens, and mouth some sort of prayer of thanksgiving for God's blessing. The cameras will avoid panning to the defensive back who just gave up the touchdown, who also might be gazing skyward and making a gesture and mouthing an oath of another sort.

On Monday I wrote to a group of clergy with whom I used to meet regularly to study the biblical texts for coming Sundays, asking them to send me any ideas they have discussed. I said that in return I would send them an analysis of why the Packers lost to the Cardinals. Bill wrote back, "The Packers lost because You-Know-Who wasn't paying attention to the coin toss but was too busy reeling in the Hail Mary accolades generated by yet another one of Aaron Rogers' ridiculous heaves to the end zone." He signed it, "From a hopelessly whiny and bitter Bears Fan lamenting the Lord's chronic and not so benign neglect of yesterday's Monsters of the Midway."

As if God cares. We do not want a God who determines the outcome of a game. We want a God who uses us to bring peace in the Middle East, who humbles the haughty and embraces the humble, who inspires us to preserve the creation, who holds us to the commandment to love one another, who reveals to us the purpose of life, the point of it all. We want the God we have who has revealed truth in the created order, redeemed us through Jesus Christ, and empowered us with a holy Spirit. If we worship a God whose primary purpose is to fix the outcome of professional football games, then our lives are pointless.

We read a grand vision of God in Psalm 19. "The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork." Look around us at the world in which we live, and we will learn about God . . . God's laws which give us life, God's truth which makes us wise, God's order which sets us straight, God's expectations which give us insight, God's sense of what is right which inspires our hearts. The psalm ends with the author yearning to be faithful to such a revelatory God, giving us this glorious petition, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and redeemer." Let everything I say and think and do conform to your purpose as revealed to us in your universe, O God.

That is an affirmation of faith not universally accepted as a statement of fact. Here is a portion of The New York Times, October 7, 2007, with the question in bold type across the top of the page, "Does the Universe have a Purpose?" Below it are the responses of several scientists and philosophers. "No," exclaims Peter Atkins, a professor of Chemistry at Oxford University. "In the absence of evidence, the only reason to suppose that it does is sentimental wishful thinking, and sentimental wishful thinking, which underlies all religion, is an unreliable tool for the discovery of truth of any kind."

But then, here is Owen Gingerich, a professor of astronomy at Harvard, "Yes . . . I believe that the universe has a purpose, and our greatest intellectual challenge as human beings is to glimpse what purpose this might be." The search usually begins for us when we as teenagers, in our angst, ask, "What's the meaning of it all?" The professor reflects, "The question is existential, but the answer is subtle. Understanding emerges not in thunder, earthquake, and fire, but in the still small voice of the universe itself."

Neil de Grasse Tyson, the "rock star" of moon rocks and asteroids, an astrophysicist at the Hayden Planetarium, says, "Not sure. Anyone who expresses a more definitive response to the question is claiming access to knowledge not based on empirical foundations. This remarkably persistent way of thinking, common to most religions and some branches of philosophy, has failed badly in past efforts to understand, and thereby predict the operations of the universe and our place within it."

And Elie Wiesel, a professor at Boston University who has taught all of us so much about surviving the Holocaust, "I hope so. And if it doesn't, it's up to us to give it one."

No . . . yes . . . not sure . . . I hope so, all answers to the universal question, "What's the purpose of life? What's the point? Does the universe tell us anything?"

We have heard the psalmist's answer, "Yes, there is a purpose, and it is revealed in the very nature of the universe itself. Read the facts, be good scientists as well as good people of faith, and discover how we can live in union with God, not in contradiction."

Jesus offers another way of saying, "Yes, there is purpose," not by directing us to look at the stars but rather to look, as a diligent rabbi would suggest, at the vision of the prophet Isaiah. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." The purpose of life, at least for Jesus, is to make all of this come true. "I am here to fulfill this scripture." If there is order and symmetry among the stars in the heavens, then there needs to be order and symmetry among people on earth.

"The year of the Lord's favor" cited in Isaiah by Jesus is a specific reference to the ideal vision of the Year of Jubilee. There was a basic understanding throughout the history of Israel that over time life becomes unfair for some people. The rich will get richer and the poor poorer, some people will be incarcerated, others will be oppressed by the

powerful, and some will have just lost out. So, the Year of Jubilee would come every 50 years when the whistle would blow and the command would come, "Okay, everybody, let us put everything back in the middle of the table again and we will start from scratch." Like playing Monopoly, "All the money goes back in the middle, turn in your hotels and your property holdings. We are back to even." The Year of Jubilee never became a reality, human nature being as it is, but the ideal was never lost, and certainly not on Jesus, who sees in its egalitarianism the purpose of his life.

Do we want to be thought of as dreamers today, like Jesus? If so, we can claim this vision as our own right now. Oxfam, a 70-year old anti-poverty international confederation announced last week that the 62 richest people in the world at the pinnacle of the pyramid possess more wealth than the 3.6 billion people who are crushed at the bottom. 62 people have as much wealth as one-half of the world's population . . . can we imagine saying today, "Okay, everybody, let's put it all back in the middle of the table and start over again"? Jesus ran into resistance when he said it to his hometown crowd back in Nazareth, but we would run into enormous hostility if we said it now.

But wait, we did say it last Monday. We said it with actions, not words, usually the most articulate way of making a point. Remember that it was Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, and most public buildings were closed. And it was death-threateningly cold. I came to the church late in the afternoon for an evening meeting, walked past the open doors of the Fellowship Hall, stopped and stared; I saw "heaven," or at least a glimpse of it, in our Fellowship Hall. There were about 100 people gathered around tables, eating food, talking with one another, playing cards and board games, relaxing, being not only warm, but thanks to the hospitality of everyone involved, being truly human. It is hard being human when we are freezing to death under a bridge or cowering in the corner of a tent out in the park. It is hard to be fully human when we have not eaten in a day, when the few things we have are vulnerable to theft, when the authorities look threatening, and we do not have a dollar for a bad cup of coffee. But here at First Church on that frigid day we gathered as the "beloved community."

Karen Andro, our Director of Outreach Ministries, had spent her birthday last Sunday arranging to open our church on Monday to compensate for public spaces that would be "off limits" on the holiday, getting food to be delivered, AmeriCorp volunteers to be on duty, church members to work in the kitchen, city outreach teams to provide transportation and supervision. . . Karen, as her birthday gift, giving heat and light and food and safety and respect to over 130 people throughout the day. It was heavenly.

The only drama of the day occurred when one of our volunteers had to call 911 because a man got sick eating one of our poinsettias. That is a hard occurrence to anticipate. Maybe he asked, "What is this?" And someone answered, "A poinsettia," and he thought the person said, "A pizza," and began chewing. It was good that the emergency responders had not taken the day off.

As a further blessing, some people beyond this place saw the vision. Television crews came to document the moment. "Church opens building to the homeless," the headline said, as if that were something new. But on that day in this way this congregation brought good news to the poor, gave release to the captives, opened the eyes of people in the community who usually look the other way, and set all people free . . . the guests, the hosts, and the onlookers, at least for one day.

It was a proclamation without words, and one man drove up to the church in the middle of the day, gave a 50 dollar bill to a volunteer at the door, and said, "I have seen what you are doing, and I want to be a part of it." He saw the purpose of life in that moment, the point of it all. Maybe that astronomer from Harvard is right, that we discover the meaning of life not by directly pursuing it but by taking an indirect angle of approach. It is not in the thunder, earthquake, or fire, but the still small voice. "Seek first the kingdom of God" is the instruction, and all else will follow; concern ourselves with the selfless serving of others and we will discover the purpose of our own lives.

We cannot buy meaning in life. Now, our whole economic system is based on creating discontent so that I can sell you what will fill your deepest yearnings . . . that perfect body, that house on the beach, that smartphone which is smarter than you, that feast at the most exclusive restaurant with the finest wine. But such narcissism is nothing new. It is there in the Old Testament with those who summed up the meaning of life as "eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you die." Jesus warns the people against possessiveness in the parable about the rich farmer who builds all of his storehouses to hold his wealth, only to be told that he will die before he gets to enjoy it. The irony is that we cannot spend ourselves to happiness, no matter how much we have.

And we cannot make life meaningful simply by our own good efforts. Yes, we should do what is right and good and true and just and merciful and loving, following all of the ethical dictates of our faith, but if we do them in order to save ourselves, to win our way into heaven, then we will crumble under the weight of obligation. We always fall short of perfection.

No, salvation belongs to God. We cannot do it for ourselves; and, we cannot save others by what we say. We can only do what God beckons to us to do, as revealed in the creation itself, says the psalmist, and as imagined in the vision of the Jubilee, Jesus insists . . . to become fully, radically, uniquely human. Salvation will take care of itself.

Some years ago I was driving my father to his cancer treatment; this was about five months after my mother had died. As we were riding along Highway 41 toward the hospital in Racine, Dad turned to me and asked, "Do you think I'll ever see Ethel again?" That is a question of meaning, of purpose, of life beyond life. We all wonder, at times, what happens after death. How can we imagine it? Some people live their lives with the sole purpose of qualifying for living the next life in heaven, remaining unsullied, staying "above it all," not getting their hands dirty. We have the commonplace saying that "she is so heavenly-minded that she is no earthly good."

That was not what Dad was thinking. Dad had lived in love and companionship with Mom for over 60 years. He could think of nothing more glorious than to have that again. Living fully now had given him courage to imagine what is next. "Do you think I'll ever see Ethel again?" I said, "Yes, Dad, I believe that you will. I do not know how or when or in what form, but I believe that nothing, not even death, can separate us from God's love and from those whom we love."

I truly believe that, and it comforts me, but I cannot prove it. None of us can. All that we say about heaven and life after death is an imaginative projection of what we know about earth and life before death. We are called to pay attention to all that is going on around us, right here, right now, and to engage life selflessly, daringly, hopefully even to challenge the 62 at the top of the pyramid to care for the 3.6 billion at the bottom. Purpose will emerge as we live fully, and others, seeing our actions, just might get the point. Amen.