

# **The Mystery of the Universe**

Zephaniah 3:14-20

by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones

First Central Congregational UCC

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Becoming a father has made me even more sentimental than I usually am. For instance, many times over the last six months my thoughts have lingered over memories of my childhood, particularly the farm of my Grandparents Jones. I fondly recall climbing trees, exploring fields and hills and creeks, swinging on the tire swing, shooting off fireworks on Independence Day, making homemade ice cream with the hand crank, helping with the farm chores, and more. Part of me wishes I could share those same childhood experiences with Sebastian.

Two weeks ago Michael, Sebastian, and I made a quick trip to Oklahoma to visit my mother. On our return, we stopped in my hometown of Miami and visited the gravesite where my father and all four grandparents are buried. I spared also visiting the graves of my great and great-great grandparents. You really know you are from someplace when four generations of your family are buried there.

I've missed my Dad more this year than any time since he died 25 years ago. I wish he was here to experience his grandson. And every week I notice me doing something with Sebastian that's something my Dad would have done with me. The experience of fatherhood has made me realize how I'm more like him than I ever knew.

So, I wanted to visit Dad's grave and to take Sebastian there. Of course I know Dad isn't there. And I've talked to Sebastian about his grandfather and showed him pictures many times these last six months. But I wanted to take my son to this special physical place that connects me powerfully with my father.

The moment was tender. When we got out of the car Sebastian was craning his neck, like usual, wanting to take everything in around him, but when we stepped up to Dad's grave, Sebastian turned around and calmly looked down, his gaze lingering. I felt like Sebastian understood that this was a special moment.

Places matter to us. There are spots that are sacred in each of our lives—a childhood home, a tree we climbed, a university we attended, the place where our beloved proposed or where we met them. Think about the places that matter in your life. Do any of those places connect with a spiritual or religious memory or experience?

Pope Francis writes that "The history of our friendship with God is always linked to particular places which take on an intensely personal meaning; we all remember places, and revisiting those memories does us much good. Anyone who has grown up in the hills or used to sit by the spring to drink, or played outdoors in the neighborhood square; going back to these places is a chance to recover something of our true selves."

Why is this so? Why do places matter so much to us?

Francis writes that “Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God.” He adds “God has written a precious book, ‘whose letters are the multitude of created things present in the universe.’”

Over the last month we’ve examined some of the major problems troubling humanity—environmental destruction, climate change, income and social inequalities, human society gone awry, a loss of ethics and spirituality in the place of an advancing technocratic paradigm. In the face of these massive problems, what are we to do? Does Christian teaching provide any hope for a solution to our problems?

I believe it does, for Christianity teaches that creation is God’s gift and that each of us is connected to everyone and everything else in a universal communion. This communion, Francis calls “the mystery of the universe.”

This mystery rests upon our understanding of God. We believe that God is love, which means that God loves every person, every creature, every thing that God has brought into being. Francis writes, “Even the fleeting life of the least of beings is the object of [God’s] love, and in its few seconds of existence, God enfolds it with . . . affection.”

This is the parenting aspect of God. Pope Francis focuses on the image of God as Father, we would, of course, expand that image to include reflection on the mothering aspects of God. God as parent loves and embraces all of creation. This parental love reminds us that everyone and everything is worthy. Everyone and everything has value.

Christianity also teaches that the earth and its creatures do not exist for us, for our use and exploitation. Francis writes, “The ultimate destiny of the universe is in the fullness of God, which has already been attained by the risen Christ . . . the ultimate purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us. Rather, all creatures are moving forward with us and through us towards a common point of arrival, which is God, in the transcendent fullness where the risen Christ embraces and illumines all things.”

Francis’ reflections on the Cosmic Christ reminded me of a book I read twenty years ago, *The Body of God* by the ecofeminist theologian Sally McFague. McFague wrote that “the world . . . is the sacrament of God, the visible, physical, bodily presence of God.”

At the communion table we join together as the Body of Christ. We recognize that part of the spiritual power this ritual symbolizes and manifests is our connection and communion with all other Christians around the world and throughout time. We should also experience communion as a reminder that humans are not the only guests at God’s feast. This sacrament reminds us that there is a universal communion with all creatures and all things that God has created. Together with the entire cosmos we join in giving thanks to God. Together with the entire cosmos we become the body of the risen Christ.

If we understand our theology, then we couldn’t possibly be okay with exploiting and damaging other people or the natural order. For when we do so, we damage ourselves, and we mar God’s body. Our sins of exploitation and environmental damage are forms of crucifixion.

McFague writes that sin “is living falsely, living contrary to reality, to the way things are.” We must repent of the ways we have lived falsely, and we must embrace God’s future, filled with possibilities.

The prophet Zephaniah imagines for us the future of renewal brought about by God's love for us and for all creation. There will be joy and singing. Outcasts will be welcomed, included, and empowered. Our fear will be no more. Our enemies will be defeated. The wounded will be saved. Because God is bringing us home again, renewing our fortunes, and throwing a party to celebrate.

On this communion Sunday and All Saints Day, let us remember and proclaim that God's love unites us with everyone and everything. And God's love holds out hope for our salvation.