

Psalm 8  
John 16:12-15

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### **TWINKLE, TWINKLE, LITTLE STAR**

*"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." John 16:12*

Once again we are in that upper room in John Mark's house in Jerusalem that was the occasion of so many critical events in the ministry of Jesus and for the emerging church. It is where Jesus celebrated the last supper; where he washed the disciples feet on the night of his arrest; where Jesus appeared after his resurrection, twice to the disciples, the second time to doubting Thomas, who now believed; where the disciples locked themselves away in fear and trembling after the resurrected Jesus' final departure, until the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost; the place to which they went again in hiding before Peter was released from prison. Here, on the night of his arrest, the day before his crucifixion, Jesus says his farewells after three years of intimate companionship with his disciples.

Then Jesus makes a curious statement: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." Some disciples may have taken affront, after all, like faithful seminarians they had been with him night and day for three years. Yet he's telling them they are like children at this! I recall a college professor, whom I greatly admired, telling us that when he was about to graduate from high school he thought he knew everything worth knowing. Then by the time he finished college, after specializing in philosophy for two years, he realized there was a lot he still didn't know. After three more years in seminary for a master's degree in Church history, he realized, that outside that small corner of historical studies, he knew very little. Five years later he got a Ph.D. in the history of Protestantism during the Great Depression, and realized that in the grand scheme of things—he knew virtually nothing. That, in a sense, is where the disciples are. And no matter how brilliant you are at answering "Jeopardy" questions, you graduates, like the rest of us, know very little about the workings of the world and the ways of God in the world. What can be known grows exponentially against what we do know. The journey, at its best is always the engagement of wonder. What can be known always grows exponentially against what we do know. The journey is met at its best in an engagement of mystery and wonder.

The name George Buttrick likely does not mean much to many of you, but he was one of the most extraordinarily influential writers, preachers, and theologians in North America in the past century. Buttrick delighted in recording the comments of parishioners

after the sermon; things like, "Oh, Dr. Buttrick, your messages meant so much to my husband after he lost his mind." Or another who said, "Every message you preach, Dr. Buttrick, is better than the next."

On one occasion the great man met a man on an airplane, who noted Buttrick writing intently for an hour or so on a yellow legal pad during the flight. Unable to contain his curiosity, the man leaned toward him and said, "Excuse me, I hate to bother you, but you seem to be working very diligently on something there. May I ask what it is?"

"Certainly. I'm a Presbyterian minister, and I'm working on my Sunday sermon," said the good Doctor.

"Oh, religion," said the man dismissively. "I don't like to get all caught up in the ins and outs of religion. 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,' The Golden Rule: that's my religion."

"And what, may I ask, do you do, sir," said Buttrick, laying down his pen beside its scabbard.

"I work at the university," he said, "I'm an astronomer."

"Oh," said Buttrick, "astronomy. I don't like to get caught up in the ins and outs of astronomy. 'Twinkle, twinkle little star,' that's my astronomy."

Since you left middle school, religion probably hasn't been very high on your list of priorities either, or that of your friends. Religion, you've no doubt discovered, is increasingly met with a shrug, sometimes with cynicism, often with contempt. Certainly religion has often been its own worst enemy. Its capacity for grace and listening often fall far short of its capacity to hurt and destroy. It's always so important to make a distinction between the church and the person of Jesus. The same goes for other religions. Jesus is not the church. Though we call ourselves the body of Christ, we are still barely out of the egg after 2,000 years. We are infants in arms at this religious thing. We still have a few million years of spiritual maturing to go (assuming we are wise enough to make some major adjustments).

What Jesus said to the disciples that fateful night still rings true: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." Before we can hear them, usually by the discrete unveiling of the Spirit's interior voice—a wordless voice that works like binary language: this, not that—we have to put our souls in a vulnerable and teachable place. We have to learn how to become practiced listeners to the deep things of God, rather than grabbing for mere information; what we *think we know*. If we allow ourselves to discover who Jesus is for ourselves and others, and if we are patient and teachable, *our* spiritual experience—what we have known and felt, will trump mere information every time.

Among the chief reasons for religion's decline in western nations (the same is not yet true in the global south, but for quite different reasons) is the assumption that spiritual knowledge is qualitatively inferior to, and therefore depreciated in value against scientific knowledge; that religious knowledge is passé, pedestrian vis-a-vis scientific knowledge which has become king. For a long time I saw a distinction between scientific knowledge as knowledge gathered and refined, like one moving toward the point of a cone. The more

information we gather and interpret, the closer we come to the truth until we arrive at the point of truth—the *solution*, at the apex of the cone. Religion’s journey, however, seemed its opposite. But let’s not use that word “religion,” which carries too much baggage—let’s call it the “spiritual quest.” This starts *from* the point of a cone and moves outward into deepening mystery. The more “information,” the more *experience* one gathers, the wider and deeper becomes the mystery. The spiritual journey is thus infinite.

However, I now perceive that science also functions like the spiritual quest, indeed is its own sort of the spiritual quest. Science, like religion, is driven by faith—faith in one’s premise or hypothesis. Science takes its departures from a point of knowing yet not knowing: I know this and this, but not this. Or, I know this and that, which seems to predict this, and that unknown motivates my search. Like theology (the language of faith), all science is interim. It knows only so much, and its journey is also infinite, always opening to deeper mysteries and new challenges to once sacred verities.

Let me suggest an example. In the mid 1990’s, many scientists, like Stephen Hawking, predicted that we appeared to be *this* close to the holy grail of physics, the TOE or “theory of everything,” that would unite the four great universal forces that power the cosmos. Three of the four: the *strong force* that binds the nucleus of the atom, the *weak force* that hold its electrons in their orbits, and *electromagnetism* that powers everything from light to cell phones, to ex-rays, to migratory gyroscopes in animals—these three we know how to combine. But the fourth and weakest—*gravity*, has been the one exasperating holdout. It was just a matter of time, we thought, before gravity, too, would succumb to new discoveries and be integrated with the other three forces in the family. Then, in 1998, the roof caved in. Two parallel investigations of supernovae, very bright exploding stars in our expanding universe, discovered simultaneously that the universe is not only expanding (we had known that since Edwin Hubble’s discovery of the “red shift” in the 1920’s) but that—hold your breath—it is *rapidly* expanding, accelerating and thus defying all the laws of physics. A fifth force, stronger than gravity, was discovered to be at work, one completely unknown before. For want of a name we call it quintessence, or dark energy, or anti-gravity.

Every age seems to hold a new dimension to life as to how things operate, seldom making former thinking unworkable, but simply partial, interim. This scientific journey will likely be endless, just like religion’s. The two are not on diametrically opposed but converging tracks. Truth is one; each discipline simply navigating toward a common truth from different sides of the compass rose, using different but complimentary languages, and different but complimentary techniques. Science and religion each stepping out in faith in search of understanding; reason and experience both compiling their own sets of evidence, one exterior and testable, observable, and repeatable, the other interior to those criteria, the fruit of personal experience. Is experience to be dismissed as inferior evidence because it cannot be weighed, measured or photographed. If so, we must add love, justice, honor, trust, and all the classic virtues to the discard pile. “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.”

Beware the cynic who is dismissive of what he or she does not understand and is unwilling to investigate, whose worldview is perhaps challenged by different data. If religion still struggles to express its virtuous soul, so too does science. Science has its own frailties. Its predicted heavy rain simply did not materialize last night. The sophisticated security technology at our Canadian border crossings didn’t work to catch a TB carrier. The multi-billion dollar Hubble Telescope, for a long time, didn’t work. And the billions of dollars spent to protect our troops from improvised explosive devices (IED’s) haven’t reduced casualties. Science seems less and less to be the savior we had hoped for. Indeed, misdirected science seems itself to be a major contributor to global warming and humanly derived pollution, but few would propose that they be abandoned, as many, indeed, propose that religion ought to be jettisoned.

In these unparalleled turbulent times for religion worldwide, faith for your emerging generation of leadership has yet to find its authentic voice. This was the situation in China recently, where a whole generation has largely rejected the older missionary inspired Western church of a hundred years ago, and looks for an authentically modern Chinese voice. The same is true for the young in North America and Europe. Our generation cannot tell you what that emerging church should look like or feel or sound like. It needs to be your voice; too much has changed. But you can discover the fresh path, one that speaks to who you are and whom you discover God in Christ to be. And don’t ever dismiss the church, simply because it’s not your style—create your own style. Our Lord will not abandon those who faithfully try. Throughout our history, those who most faithfully served God in Christ did so, not typically from the establishment, but from the revolutionary fringes: Paul, St. Francis, Luther, John Wesley, Martin Luther King. For many of us—this is how we find our voice. We understand that our voice and the traditions that we have held sacred may not be your voice or your cherished traditions. The point is, you must find your own way, and we will help you.

Science may offer some solutions to life’s technical problems in terms of how to live well. But its promise over the last 150 years has not come through. Most of the world’s population (its poor) still live effectively as they did a century and a half ago. Science can help solve technical problems, but it cannot solve the more intractable challenges, that is our relational problems—how to get along with each other. That is religion’s provenance at it best—which we have also yet to mature to.

Jesus does offer that our life journey in and with God has the answer to how to live well toward God, neighbor, and ourselves. These, said Jesus, I reveal to you when the heart yearns—not merely to know, that’s just information—but to change the way we live toward each other and the world.

Amen.