

Sermon transcript

St Philip Oak Bay

9.30am Eucharist 1 September 2024

Preacher: Fr Allen Doerksen



**St. Philip Anglican Church**

A Spacious Place of Welcome

<https://www.stphilipvictoria.ca/podcasts/media/2024-08-25-you-will-have-what-you-need>

The Infinite vs. Finite Dilemma: The Season Of Creation (Part 1)

Reference: James 1:17-27

[00:34] It's great to be with you today as I mentioned at the beginning. I'm a big fan, I'll say that, of large, sprawling stories that attempt to capture the complexity and contradictions of people and situations. I guess, I mean, that's not really surprising, right? [01:00] because priests are called to immerse themselves in this large, unwieldy set of stories and poems and instructions that we call Holy Scripture, and we're to do that weekly. Movies, which I also really like, given the time constraints, usually around 2 hours, or less, usually can't be sprawling narratives. But there are certain talented filmmakers, like Christopher Nolan, who manage to pull it off. In his movie *Inception*, he brilliantly, in my humble opinion, illumines the depths of the human psyche and mind, using the thriller genre. And in a movie like *Interstellar*, he tells the story of a [02:00] complex drama about family dynamics – but he sets it against the unfathomable mysteries of the physical universe. Unlike any other science fiction movie that has been made to this point, it captures both the vastness and the sheer improbable weirdness of the cosmos. Humanity's search for a new home launches them not into the fantasy of multiple possible worlds that movies like *Star Wars* imagine, but into the terror of forces so beyond our imagining that they undo the minds of those who encounter them. It's a kind [03:00] of reverse psychology at work, because as you're watching the movie, you're going, "Wow, we really are in a good space. This little blue dot that we're riding on is absolutely amazing." And so, concomitantly, we're being urged, though never instructed explicitly, to care for it, to look after it.

The first Sunday of September – actually, September 1, and this year it happens to fall on a Sunday – is the Feast of Creation, the beginning of the Orthodox Church's church year. For much of the western Church, we begin the Church year on Advent 1, so usually right near the end of November, beginning of December. But we've tied ourselves to this emerging theme, as it's become evident to those of us in the west [04:00], by crafting a five-week Season of Creation that is now observed by many of the world's larger denominations, and so if you want to know more about this, it's in a blog post that I put on our website, and you can find it replicated in print in our newsletter. Suffice to say that it's not a new liturgical season. The readings don't change, you will have picked up from the reading of our Gospel

that it didn't have a particular Creation focus. But rather, we're asked to look through these regularly assigned readings with an eye to what they say about Creation and our role in it. To that end, I think it's quite lucky, or fortuitous, that the opening verses [05:00] that we happen to read today from the Letter of James could be taken as a flagship kind of verse or verses for this entire season. "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of Lights with whom there is no shadow of turning due to change. In fulfilment of their own purpose, God gave us birth by the Word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first-fruits of God's creatures." And so what *Interstellar* does via reverse psychology, James does with a positive description, outlining the core character of the Creator, and the Creator's rationale for creating.

Now, if we hold up before our senses [06:00] phrases like "every generous act of giving" and "every perfect gift" – combine that with the phrase "that we would become a kind of first-fruits of God's creatures". If we let those things just play off each other and allow it to enfold us, it creates a kind of double wonder: the wonder of everything, including us, and the equal sense of wonder that though there is no shadow of change in the Creator, there is a call to change, to become, for us. We have this crucial role to play, that seems outsized. What James outlines [07:00] that the Father of all these lights – read: the universe, and all of its mind-bending complexity and mystery – is one continual act of generous giving. This actually is a kind of – well, let's put it this way: it's one of humanity's deepest intuitions, and you can find something like what James says strewn across all of the great Wisdom traditions, whether philosophical or religious. It's a poetic insight into beauty and truth.

Now, it would seem kind of logical, to the point of obviousness, that humans become, that we live toward this generosity [08:00] in basically some sort of linear fashion. Why wouldn't we? I mean, not for nothing have we styled ourselves – what's the phrase? – *homo sapiens*, right? Wise human. Wow – if only things were that simple. Perhaps you noticed that immediately following on from this flagship verse we read something like this: "We are like those who look at themselves in a mirror and, on going away, immediately forget who we are, what we are like. And so we see this intuition clearly, that our existence is born of gift, ongoingly generous giving, and having glimpsed this [09:00], weirdly, we turn away, and attempt to control and indulge. We fear, we lash out, we crave – and the cravings that we crave are cravings that lead to destruction. And all of this, as we read in a section just previous to today's reading in which sin, the missing of the mark, and if I can say it as bluntly, it's kind of the irreverent middle finger to this generosity. And it grows and it flourishes – "flourishes" in quotes, of course. And I think we can all relate, if we're being honest. James is speaking to us [10:00]. We're a paradox to ourselves. We experience ourselves as a paradox, and it's fair to say that Creation, this earth, experiences us this way as well. We both care for and ruin those things most precious to us. We have such extraordinary capacities born of our imaginations. It's really true that the only limits are kind of on our imagination. We have managed to do so much. And at the same time, we have

nonchalantly allowed, as Merle alluded to, our soil, our air and oceans, to become toxic through the spreading of what is called “forever chemicals”. Since 1960, 100,000 of [11:00] them have entered the system, as it were. Of course, in 60 years we haven’t adapted to those chemicals. Of course we haven’t. Adaptation takes hundreds of thousands of years, not a few decades. And so that term “forever chemicals” is a terrifying phrase if there ever was one. Newborns now routinely emerge into our world with some of those chemicals already present in their system.

So how can this paradox be? How can we be so full of awe and wonder at our place in God’s creation, and so blind at the same time to the consequences of our actions? Now, you might think, well, I can see where this is going [12:00], typical Christian on repentance. Take it in a little bit different direction this morning – I’m not really here to shame or blame, any of that. But I think to answer that question, we need to start with God. God is infinite. We are finite. And so here’s the thing: God seems perfectly fine with that.

Let me explain. God seems perfectly fine with assigning us a God-like task, though we are finite. To put within us a sense of the whole, and then call us to become what we are in theory, but not yet in practice. [13:00] I mean, what could go wrong, right? What could go wrong with that scenario? I mean, to be clear, God expects more. God expects us to become – but this becoming, because we’re not infinite, must start from where we are, from our finite existence. And so we must grow into our calling to be generous, to become the first fruits of God’s creatures, to become generous in the ways that God is generous. What makes all of this so tricky, right, is that in human history, this becoming is not passed on like our DNA is passed on, like different traits that we have are passed on. As Jesus says in our reading from Mark, we can get [14:00] a whole bunch of things right in terms of public policy – I mean, who is going to disagree in our day and age with the washing of hands? – right? That’s a good thing. Every one of us should wash our hands, many times, probably. And we should wash the things we buy at the market. And our pots and pans. Nothing wrong with any of that. But Jesus’ point of course, is that we can have clean hands, but our hearts can still be elbow-deep in evil. In other words, care of ourselves, our neighbours, indeed care of creation, that this season calls us to, hinges on the one thing that can’t be permanently changed, can’t be passed on: the reformation of the heart. Which is why human history is never a linear process [15:00] of things getting better, at least in terms of human motivations and character. Things get better in other ways, things get worse in other ways, but this is a constant. Whatever transformation of our core motivations, whatever capacities we develop to become more one with that stillness of God that is at the centre of that flagship verse, “no shadow of turning in God”, and we know intuitively that’s where we need to get to if we’re going to stop all of this anger and illicit craving. But we know that’s the one thing that we can’t pass on to the next generation, even if we get it ourselves. That they, too, have to become.

Now you're wondering where's the good news in this, Doerksen? Like, God [16:00] set this up for the finite to move toward the infinite, and that's going to be messy. It might not even work – so where's the good news? Well, the good news is that God didn't look at that and says, "Man, did I mess up. I'm backing out. I'm going to go over there." That's not what happened. God didn't flee the scene. God is not discouraged by the fact that we are incomplete to the point of being a constant danger to ourselves and our home. God made us this way, and God thinks the risk more than worth it. God seems to have found it worthy of God-ness to create the largest, most improbable, complicated, sprawling story [17:00] possible: the universe and everything in it. But in this hugely complex narrative we call the universal history and, let's narrow it down a bit, human history, we see that God gets involved. And God gets ultimately involved in Jesus Christ and the giving of the Holy Spirit. And this means there really is a purpose in and amongst the chaos, both of our personal lives, our wider society, and the large existential threats that are before us. That the ongoing experiments of hopefulness open to us in art and poetry, in people working for the common good across institutions of all kinds, will bring us [18:00] – and yes, this is a helpful note on Labour Day weekend – will bring us yet, both as people, as communities, and our world, to a kind of fullness: God involved with us, so that we can be involved in all that is good and beautiful and true. May it be so in our hearts, and in our communities. Amen.