

“Speak to Us of Eternal Things”
Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Psalm 8:1-9; John 16:12-15;
Trinity Sunday

John 16:12-15

[Jesus said,] ¹²“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

Psalm 8:1-9

¹O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.

²Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.

³When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;

⁴what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?

⁵Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.

⁶You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,

⁷all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,

⁸the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,

whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

⁹O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

¹Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?

²On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand;

³beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out:

⁴“To you, O people, I call,
and my cry is to all that live.

²²The LORD created me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of long ago.

²³Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.

²⁴When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.

²⁵Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth—

²⁶when he had not yet made earth and fields,
or the world’s first bits of soil.

²⁷When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,

²⁸when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,

²⁹when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,

³⁰then I was beside him, like a master worker;
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,

³¹rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race.”

The Sermon

Will you pray with me?

“Eternal God, Your love for us is everlasting...
In the stillness of this hour, speak to us of eternal things,
so that, hearing your promises in scripture,
[we may] be lifted into the peace of your presence...”ⁱ

Speak to us of eternal things,
because the mundane concerns of our long days and fitful nights
absorb so much of our limited time and energy and attention
that we often miss the opportunity
to hear and attend to your word and your wisdom,
to nourish our spirits by reflecting on
eternity and infinity, life and death, love and meaning.

Speak to us of eternal things,
because, while we can talk for ourselves at Pentecost
about who the Holy Spirit is, and how the Spirit relates
to us and the Church and the world,
Trinity Sunday is not so accessible;
and, while we who occupy pulpits
often fail to speak about so much that matters—
racial mistrust and injustice,
human identity
and the perils of lack of sympathy and compassion,
the fragility of the natural environment
and the sinful disregard for it
by the humanity whom you entrusted to steward it—
instead, we clumsily attempt clarifications
and vainly seek clever metaphors
to try to contain and explain the doctrine of the Holy Trinity—
as your servant Barbara Lundblad has said,
“answering questions no one is asking.”ⁱⁱ

Everlasting God,
Speak to us of eternal things,
because we ourselves use all the words at our disposal until we run out,
all the images to describe you
that we can glean from the Bible and our lived experience,
and still cannot find a language
that lets us comprehend you fully.

Speak to us of eternal things,
because in the face of the enormous challenges to the planet we live on,
and the peoples who cry out in pain and frustration and hunger,
we feel powerless,
and we long for your holy mystery

to inspire in us enough hope, and gratitude, and awe
to empower us to become, at long last,
what you created us to be. Amen.

He was born in 1897, an African-American boy in a small rural community in East-Central Texas. His mother died when he was about five, and his father re-married shortly after.

A story was told years later that when he was seven, his father caught his stepmother seeing another man, and took his rage out on her with his fists; and she retaliated not against him, but against his son. She threw lye in the young boy's face, which permanently blinded him.

Eventually that little boy, from a household that harbored shame and misery, grew into a young man who went by the name Blind Willie Johnson, and retrospectively has been recognized as one of the original generation of blues musicians.ⁱⁱⁱ

He only recorded 29 songs between 1927 and 1930. After 1930, he never recorded again. Most of his life was lived in obscurity—there is only one known photograph of him—and all of it in poverty, singing for spare change on the streets of small towns like Beaumont, Texas.

One of his most legendary recordings is called “Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground.” It contains not a single word, just three and a half minutes of spare, wire-string slide guitar being played with a bottleneck, and Blind Willie Johnson's haunting, deep blues moan—an agonized prayer from the depths of human loneliness with sighs too deep for words.

A 1945 city directory for Beaumont lists a House of Prayer operated by the Rev. W. J. Johnson, which, it is thought, must have been him.

That summer of 1945, his meager home was destroyed by a fire. But he continued to sleep there at night, in the ruins, under wet newspapers. One of his alleged wives said later that she tried to take him to a hospital, but they wouldn't admit him because he was blind. Other people said it was because he was black.

On September 14th, 1945, Blind Willie Johnson, 48 years old, penniless, who hadn't recorded a thing in the last 15 years, died of malaria complicated by syphilis and blindness.

Nobody knows exactly where he was buried.

World War II was over; the United States emerged as a superpower; and in a competitive race toward superior technology, NASA was formed in 1958.

In the mid-1970s, a rare opportunity was coming up to be able to bounce exploratory spacecraft from Jupiter to Saturn to Uranus to Neptune, and then on out into the vast emptiness beyond, and NASA had the funding and the imagination to prepare two spacecraft—Voyager 1 and 2—to send out to the lonely darkness of the outer solar system.^{iv}

In a remarkable moment of imagination and forethought, they called together a group, led by Carl Sagan, who were tasked to come up with content for a time capsule that would be attached to both Voyagers: a 12-inch, playable, gold-plated copper disk filled with pictures and sounds from the natural environment and various cultures on Earth.

The probes were launched in 1977, and in the 1980s they fulfilled their mission by sending back stunning pictures from the orbits of the distant planets they were visiting. After they had given us our closest ever look at Neptune, they passed Pluto's orbit in 1990, and still they kept sending data back to earth. Just this year, 2016, many of the instruments that make that possible will shut down, and NASA expects that all power in both craft will be expended around 2025.

From then on, Voyagers 1 and 2 will be left just to sail and sail. If they don't suffer any collisions—which they are not likely to; it really is an inconceivably vast emptiness out there in the incomprehensible distances between stars—they could keep sailing out there for well over 2 billion years.

Or, of course, there is the remote chance—infinitesimally small, really—that somewhere, out there, in the vastness of God's creation, they may be intercepted by some life form similar enough to our own species that they could decipher how to access the information on that golden disc.

And if they can play the golden disc, and if they have anything like ears to receive and interpret sound waves, at the end of what they hear on that disc—after the voices, the sounds of nature, the greetings in 55 languages, the songs of humpback whales—just before the concluding track, a piece by Beethoven, they will hear the haunting sound of Blind Willie Johnson, moaning his way through “Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground,” perhaps hundreds or even thousands of millions of years after he recorded that lonely wail from the depths of the human soul.

In a greeting signed by President Carter, written in the midst of a long and unbearably tense Cold War, fraught with the possibility that earth’s two superpowers would, in a mutually destructive orgy of death, unleash their obscene array of thermonuclear weapons, those hypothetical alien beings would come across, and perhaps be able to decipher, these lines:

“This is a present from a small, distant world, a token of our sounds, our science, our images, our music, our thoughts and our feelings. We are attempting to survive our time so we may live into yours.”^v

Since time immemorial, human beings have gazed up at the astonishing stars in the night sky, and recognized with awe how small we are in God’s vast creation.

*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?*

Psalm 8 appears alongside, and in the theological company of, all the other psalms, which lift up human questions and wonderings, and sometimes show raw human emotion at its worst—and sometimes show faithfulness at its most noble.

They are confident in the knowledge that our tiny little lives matter greatly to the infinite creator of the universe and author of life, who knows each atom intimately, and encompasses the impossible billions of billions of galaxies, and all the appallingly empty space between them.

This God is constantly reaching out for you and me and all people, and in the person of Jesus, the Christ, from Nazareth, God has displayed what it

means to be fully human, and demonstrated God's boundless love for humanity.

And yet, God remains a holy mystery, impossible to reduce or separate into Creator-Redeemer-Sustainer; inadequately addressed as Father-Son-Holy Ghost; only dimly perceived as Three-in-One and One in Three Persons.

In silent awe before the cosmic Holy Mystery that is our all-sufficient God, and in the light and warmth of God's love in which we are saturated,

I want to go find that young boy in Texas in 1904, with the lye burning his face, and I want to wash his eyes with pure water for as long as it takes.

I want to rush him to the hospital, and demand that the doors be flung open and the finest physicians work as hard as they can, to the fullest extent of their capabilities, and using every ounce of their stamina, every iota of their knowledge, save that young boy's eyesight.

I want to go into that home and help people find solutions to domestic violence that don't simply involve more violence.

I want to talk, and share, and listen, so that relationships can be more trusting, and more trustworthy.

I want to make sure they have adequate education, and a range of possibilities to hone and build on their God-given talent and ability.

I want to take that destitute street preacher, sleeping in a damp bed of newspapers in the infectious ruins of a burned out house, and put him into adequate housing, and provide for him a sense of family, of real community.

I can't do any of that now, though—not for him.

But in the time that I have left in this life on this planet, I can advocate. I can witness. I can fight for justice. I can work to alleviate hunger. I can offer somebody a hand.

And a billion years after my meager efforts have been expended and all memory of me is faded into oblivion—my century, my times, my life, my personality, whatever I have done, anything I have said or written—

Somewhere in this universe, a small craft will continue on its silent trajectory, bearing a record which, in the infinitesimal chance that some other intelligent creature of God finds it, and plays it, will play the voice of Blind Willie Johnson.

So, three thoughts, for Trinity Sunday:

First, the reality of who God is—
the Holy Mystery of the Triune God—
existed before the beginning of time, and will be long after:
God is greater than time;
and the whole universe is encompassed within the expanse of God:
there is no place in the cosmos or beyond that was not created by God.
God as we know God is larger than all time and all space.

Second, the story of Blind Willie Johnson's voice
being preserved for two thousand millions of years—
the voice of someone who, by nearly every earthly measure
lived an obscure life, marginalized, and forgotten,
now outlasting all of human and earthly life as we know it—
that story is only a pale imitation of the permanence
in which the Triune God hears and values and preserves your life
and the lives of all your loved ones.

Third, there is no part of you, no piece of your life,
that is insignificant to God.
Each of us is Created, Redeemed, and Sustained
by the awesome God who has a vested interest in your well-being,
every triumphant and mundane moment of your precious life.

The Spirit of Wisdom has been at God's side
since before the beginning of the earth.
When there were no depths,
when there were no springs abounding with water,
before the mountains had been shaped, before the soil,
always beside the Creator God like a master worker;
rejoicing in God's inhabited world
and delighting in the human race.

According to Ephesians,
God chose you before the foundations of the world.

You were important to God since God conceived of you,
and God does not ever stop loving you.

You are known and watched over.

You are a child of God. You are a sibling of Jesus. You breathe in the Holy Spirit at all times.

“Eternal God, Your love for us is everlasting;
only you could turn the shadows of our earthly mortality
into the brightness of the morning light.

In the stillness of this hour, speak to us of eternal things,
so that, hearing your promises in scripture,
we may have hope
and be lifted above all our distress
into the peace of your presence;

through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

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Montreat Presbyterian Church
Montreat, NC
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ⁱ These words are from a traditional prayer usually offered in a Service of Witness to the Resurrection—that is, a funeral

ⁱⁱ Lundblad made this pithy and insightful comment in an address at the Festival of Homiletics in Minneapolis around the year 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱ Information about Blind Willie Johnson is public knowledge, compiled here from various general sources. A fascinating article by Michael Corcoran of the American-Statesman, originally published in 2003, was found online republished at

<http://www.austin360.com/news/entertainment/arts-theater/he-left-a-massive-imprint-on-the-blues-but-little-/nRzPM/>

^{iv} See NASA’s website <http://voyager.jpl.nasa.gov/spacecraft/goldenrec.html>

^v See also Carl Sagan, et. al., *Murmurs of Earth*. New York City: Ballantine Books, 1978; p. 178