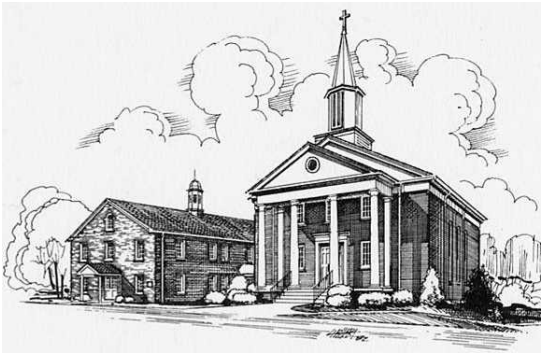
The Lessons Appointed for Use

on

Proper 15

Year A

RCL



Genesis 45:1-15
Psalm 133
Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

The Collect

Almighty God, you have given your only Son to be for us a sacrifice for sin, and also an example of godly life: Give us grace to receive thankfully the fruits of his redeeming work, and to follow daily in the blessed steps of his most holy life; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,

one God, now and for ever. *Amen*.

Genesis 45:1-15

Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, “Send everyone away from me.” So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?” But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come closer to me.” And they came closer. He said, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves,

because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, ‘Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all

that you have. I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.' And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here." Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.

For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

SERMON

Fair warning. I'm going to get my geek on rather badly this Sunday. Buckle up! I'm going to talk about the Big Bang Theory of the origin of well...everything. That's a pretty odd thing to preach about, wouldn't you agree? But there's something of great importance in the incomprehensible theory of the beginning of the universe which I think you will find of value. Let's try, anyway, OK?

To begin at the beginning, were you to somehow go back 13.8 billion years, what would you find? An empty universe? No. You would find a void universe. It's impossible to imagine, I know. You picture yourself looking out at a blank, empty uni-

verse and you've already gone wrong. There can be no "you" in a void universe. Neither can there be an expanse of space upon which to look. A void universe has neither space, nor time, nor point of view. Are you baffled yet? Ready to give up because it's just too complicated and hard? Good! That's what I'm shooting for because now I can't help but think of the beginning of the Genesis creation story.

> In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void...

We accept the bare assertion from Genesis, but it's just too hard to think through the implications of it. We can't picture nothing without a perspective from which to view it, but if there were a per-

spective, it wouldn't be nothing. Catch-22.

Then things get really spooky. There was a bang. Theorists admit that they don't know what banged, or what caused it to bang, nor how it banged, but with that bang, space itself began suddenly to expand outward. It is still doing so. We can actually measure it! Following that bang, all there was light, light that is still with us today and is known as the Cosmic Background Radiation. Astronomers have even produced photos of it! It filled the newly created space and again I thought:

> Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

After about 380,000 years of brightness, things settled down a bit and we began to see physical

things. Mostly hydrogen and lithium, but still… The first stars, made up only of these light elements formed. Again, Genesis whispered to me:

> And God said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth."

Let's stop here before we get distracted, for we are in danger of just that. I am not trying to demonstrate that the Big Bang Theory is Scriptural and I'm certainly not trying to "prove" Scripture by showing that it has a foundation in astrophysics. Such things are <u>serious</u> errors. You take the first step down that path, you may never find your way back. What I am trying to do is to place the baf-

fling beside the familiar to show the degree to which we have allowed ourselves to trivialize God's act of creation. Hear me closely. There is no one hearing these words who is capable of understanding the mathematics behind the Friedmann–Lemaître–Robertson–Walker metric which describes the expansion of the universe. Yet, when we read:

> In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth...

we are very likely to nod our head and agree as if we understood the enormity of what was being placed before us. That arrogance goes down like mother's soup because we haven't spent any time considering the import of it!

Here's the point I'm struggling so ineffectively to make: a lifetime of singing "Jesus Loves Me This I Know" has led us to humanize God into a grandfatherly figure – the old man on the throne – and robbed us of the mind-bending awareness of God which should drop us to our knees, our faces to the ground, were we to permit ourselves to know it. We easily admit, without shame, that we do not understand what it means to call forth the universe from nothing, but then skate right past those complexities in favor of imagining God, the Creator, as a more approachable, human sized being. I'm urging that we recapture the awareness of God's otherness known to the ancient people, the awareness given to Elijah at Horeb.

He said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

I’m urging that we abandon the grandfatherly God we have become so comfortable with that we imagine we can negotiate with Him in place of a proper relationship between the Creator of all and we, His created.

Take my story! As I took office, I swore,

> **“I will faithfully execute, to the best of my ability, the office of Commonwealth’s Attorney according to law...”**

The law of Kentucky provides for the death penalty for some offenses. I was handed such an offense. God spoke to me, saying, “Thou shalt not kill”. Neither, I reasoned, could I argue to a jury that the law of Kentucky took precedence over God’s commandment. I said as much and was fired from the job I had held for 25 years. I did not then, nor do I now, despair, for God then brought me here.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come closer to me.” And they came closer. He said, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God

Go back and re-read the story of the hatred and jealousy which drove the brothers to abduct Joseph. Look upon the evil in their hearts and speech. It’s revolting.

“Here comes that dreamer!” they said to each other. “Come now, let’s kill him and throw

him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams."

But when their anger had reached its peak, Reuben spoke

When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him from their hands. "Let's not take his life," he said. "Don't shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the wilderness, but don't lay a hand on him." Reuben said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his father.

Eventually, it was decided to sell him as a slave into Egypt from whence he became a second father to Pharaoh and was able to save the entire family from famine. As Joseph told his brothers:

And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for

God sent me before you to preserve life.

All of us envision God within the limitations of our own, human, imaginations. What other choice have we? We are limited creatures. It is only when we confront the majesty of Creation that we can come face-to-face with our limitations and, facing them, reject them. Only then can we, with Ezra, say:

"I am too ashamed and disgraced, my God, to lift up my face to you, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens. From the days of our ancestors until now, our guilt has been great.

Only from such a confession can a proper relationship with The Holy begin to blossom.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

I'll never know if I refused to argue for the death penalty because I was following God's will or if I had simply tired of my job and wanted to find a way out that I could feel good about. Ultimately, the case was argued by another, and the jury refused to return a verdict of death. Joseph's brothers didn't know, either, but the family was saved. It doesn't matter what you think. Do what you are called to do.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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