

Psalm 90

2 Peter 3:1-18

August 18, 2019

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

All In God's Time
LIVING TODAY FOR GOD'S SOME DAY

Let us pray: Gracious God, may your message and preaching come through your Holy Spirit's power, so that our faith might rest upon your power and presence. Fill us with all joy and peace as we trust in you for our present and into your future; through the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

How did the world begin?

According to Genesis, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light." (Genesis 1:1-3)

According to NASA Science, one theory of how the world began is what we know as "The Big Bang Theory" (although it didn't necessarily involve a loud BOOM!). "In 1927, an astronomer named Georges Lemaitre . . . said that a very long time ago, the universe started as just a single point. He said the universe stretched and expanded to get as big as it is now, and that it could keep on stretching. When the universe began, it was just hot, tiny particles mixed with light and energy. As everything expanded and took up more space, it cooled down. The tiny particles grouped together. They formed atoms. Over lots of time, atoms came together to form stars and galaxies. The first stars created bigger atoms and groups of atoms called molecules. Galaxies were crashing and grouping together. As new stars were being born and dying, then things like asteroids, comets, planets, and black holes formed! How long did all of this take? We now know that the universe is 13.8 billion years old."¹

Personally, I don't think the two accounts are incompatible, although I know many people would disagree with me.

So, if that's how the world began to be, how will the world end?

One theory is referred to as "The Big Crunch." The expansion of the universe will begin to slow down due to gravity. As gravity exerts its force, galactic clusters will start crashing together. Stars and planets will merge. The gravitational forces of the stars and galaxies will start pulling the universe together again. Eventually, everything in the universe will collapse into a dense spot of an infinitely small size. Think about a reversal of "The Big Bang Theory." I don't think we have to pack our bags, though. Estimates of when "The Big Crunch" might take place range up to 100 billion years from now. Interestingly, when it happens, time will cease to exist.

In light of "The Big Crunch," listen again to how Peter describes what might be called "the end of the earth": "by the word of God heavens existed long ago and an earth was formed out of water and by means of water, through which the world of that time was deluged with water and perished. But by the same word the present heavens

and earth have been reserved for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the godless. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.” (2 Peter 3:5-6, 10)

Again, personally, I don't think the two accounts are incompatible, because I don't think they're necessarily talking about the same thing. In fact, they both share the idea of intense heat being involved. And note this — we don't know when either one of them is going to happen! NASA says some time in the next 100 billion years. Peter says, “with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.” (2 Peter 3:8)

I just finished reading the newest book by New York Times op-ed writer David Brooks called *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life*. In Part IV, “Philosophy and Faith,” he writes about coming to faith/coming back to faith in a chapter he calls “A Most Unexpected Turn of Events.” He writes about the stories of Adam and Eve, Moses, the prodigal son and his father, and comments, “These stories are not just about common things that happen to people. They are representations of ongoing moral life. We are alive in the natural world, and we use science to understand that layer of aliveness. We are also alive in another dimension, the dimension of spirit and meaning. We use the biblical stories to understand that dimension of aliveness.” He goes on to say, “If there are no overarching stories, then life is meaningless. Life does not feel meaningless. These stories provide, in their simple yet endlessly complex ways, a living script. They provide the horizon of meaning in which we live our lives — not just our individual lives, but our lives together. These stories describe a great moral drama, which is not an individual drama but a shared drama. We are still a part of this drama . . . created and being created still.”²

That's a good description of how we can read and understand the scriptures — “they provide the horizon of meaning in which we live our lives — not just our individual lives, but our lives together.” How, then, are we to hear and become part of Peter's story which he probably wrote at the end of the first century A.D. and in which he talks about “the heavens passing away with a loud noise and the elements being dissolved with fire”?

It's no coincidence that this language in 2 Peter sounds a lot like Revelation. It's also no coincidence that people who find Revelation frightening would probably also find Peter's description of the end of the world just as frightening. And yet . . . as I always emphasize whenever I teach Revelation, before you ever get to any of the “scary stuff” in Revelation, you have to read chapters 4 & 5, which paint a vivid picture of God sitting on his throne in heaven, reigning supreme, with the Lamb who died for your sins and mine sitting there with him. In the words of David Brooks, this is “the horizon of meaning in which we live our lives.” And it is a horizon of hope — in Revelation, in Psalm 90, in 2 Peter 3:10.

Before you get to verse 10 in 2 Peter 3, you must read verse 9, which offers this word of hope and moral challenge: “The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to

repentance.” Peter was contending against scoffers who, already just forty or fifty years after Jesus died and was raised again, were questioning if God could be trusted to be true to his promise. After all, they said, it’s already been forty or fifty years since Jesus promised to come again, and where is he? If he hasn’t come back by now, why should we think he will ever return? And, if that’s true, how can we trust any of God’s promises? We might as well just live however we want to live.

Now, multiply that attitude by 2,000 years, and you begin to understand how, even as people of faith, we can begin to lose our sense of urgency and hope and expectation that God’s promises in Jesus Christ will come true. But that’s exactly when God’s time comes into play or, as Peter writes, “do not ignore this one fact, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.” (2 Peter 3:8) The psalmist said the same thing, many years before Peter wrote his letter: “For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night.” (Psalm 90:4)

I don’t think we need to spend much time worrying about when “The Big Crunch” is going to happen. By the same token, I don’t think we need to spend much time worrying about when Jesus is going to return or when the world is going to end. After all, even Jesus himself told his disciples, “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.” (Mark 13:32-33, 37)

But that is very different from saying we ought to be **very** concerned about how we live in the meantime. That’s Peter’s point as he writes, “Since,” and “Therefore” . . . “What sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God? In accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.” (2 Peter 3:11, 13)

I hope you realize and can appreciate that the hymns we sing in Sunday worship are chosen with care and for a particular purpose (even if they’re not always the most familiar). Today’s hymns are taken from two sections in *Glory to God*. Hymns 347 - 369 are hymns about Christ’s Return and Judgment, and include “Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence,” “My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less,” “Rejoice, the Lord is King!,” “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” “Come, Ye Thankful People, Come,” and “Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory of the Coming of the Lord.”

Our opening hymn “My Lord! What a Morning” comes from this section. We sang about hearing the trumpet sound when the stars begin to fall. We sang about the sinners crying and the Christians shouting, when the stars began to fall. An early version of the song is connected to Edisto Island, South Carolina. Interestingly, two different editions from 1874 and 1875 have different spellings for “morning” — one was “m-o-r-n-i-n-g” and the other was “m-o-u-r-n-i-n-g.” In the *Glory to God Companion*, you read, “Ultimately, the two spellings describe different sides of the same coin. The redeemed will rejoice on the day of the general resurrection, the ‘great getting-up morning,’ and those who are not redeemed will weep. However this debated word is

spelled, the larger truth is that Christ's coming in glory will be a cosmic event, one involving the whole creation that is being made new."³

Hymns 370 - 384 are about "A New Heaven and a New Earth" and include "Shall We Gather at the River," "I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light," and "We Shall Overcome." Our second and third hymns are taken from this section, which reminds us of Revelation 21:1, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more."

Maltbie Babcock, a Presbyterian minister in upstate New York, would tell his wife "I am going out to see the Father's world" as he left for his daily walks. When he died in 1901, his wife released a collection of his poems called *Thoughts for Everyday Living*. One of the poems was called "My Father's World" and had sixteen four-line stanzas (aren't you glad we only sang two this morning?). The two verses we did sing talk about the beauty and wonder of God's creation and God's sovereign care and power over this world: "though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet. The battle is not done: Jesus who died shall be satisfied, and earth and heaven be one."⁴

Our closing hymn is "Soon and Very Soon" by Andrae Crouch. Even though we've established that we don't know exactly when that is going to happen (after all, a thousand years in the Lord's sight are like one day), the hymn expresses the hope and anticipation and expectation of the believer's life today — all of which are motives for righteous living today as we wait for God's some day. Again, as the *Glory to God Companion* points out, "Especially when coupled with the 'Hallelujah' refrain, the tone is full of excitement and joyful expectation, a far cry from the fearful attitudes that once characterized portrayals of Christ's return. Christ is no longer the forbidding Judge but the consoling and life-bestowing King. The repetition of the first stanza as the last accentuates the sense of anticipation that is central to this gospel hymn."⁵

If I were you, I wouldn't worry too much about "The Big Crunch." After all, it might be 100 billion years away. By the same token, I wouldn't worry about "the end of the world" but I would encourage you to take seriously what it means to live as God's people today in light of the promise that some day, Christ will return in all of his glory. And, when that happens, contrary to "The Big Crunch" it won't be the destruction of the world, but "God's re-creation of the new day, a new heaven and a new earth."

In 1978, the Presbyterian Church approved a document called "The Doctrine of Last Things." This was during the heyday of books about the Rapture and the end times and the end of the world. I can't read the whole thing to you this morning, but will be glad to share a link with you so you can read it for yourself online. However, I would like to share a few of the topic sentences and the conclusion:

- * We believe in focusing more on the fact of Christ's return than in speculating on how it may occur.

- * We believe in trusting that God has all things under control even when we cannot see the future clearly.

- * We believe that to wait expectantly for Christ's return is the command to every believer.

* We believe in practicing obedience to what is clear in the Scriptures rather than the interpretation of the obscure.

* We believe that we cannot sit passively by but must work for the kingdom of God until Christ returns.

* The hope for the world, today and in the future, is in Jesus Christ!

* We must be about doing the will of God on a daily basis, looking expectantly for Christ's return, working for the kingdom of God and proclaiming the good news of the gospel.

* One day, in God's own timing and own way, Christ will return and make all things new.

* Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.⁶

Let us pray: Eternal God, you alone are constant in this changing world. Grant us true wisdom of heart and guide us in serving you all the days of our life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹“What Is the Big Bang?” at www.spaceplace.nasa.gov.

²David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life* (New York: Random House, 2019), p. 213.

³Carl P. Daw, Jr., *Glory to God: A Companion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), p. 358.

⁴Information taken from “This Is My Father’s World” at www.godtube.com.

⁵Daw, p. 391.

⁶Robert Bohler, Jr., “What Presbyterians Believe about the future, Part 3: Our Distinctive Theological Voice,” June 1, 2001 at www.pres-outlook.org.