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**Gen. 1:1; Jer. 4:23; Luke 9:23-25**

### ***The Void***

For our scripture and sermon this morning we're continuing with the fourth week of our five-week sermon series as we try to engage biblically and spiritually with the five classical elements of creation. We began with some reflections on water a few weeks ago, as we celebrated two baptisms here in worship. We moved from water to earth in the next week, as we heard from some of Jesus' very earthy parables about the kingdom of God, and then immediately after worship we gathered outside around our new raised bed gardens and blessed that earth in preparation for our inaugural planting. Last week we considered the third element sky, as we reflected on that great opening verse from Psalm 19, "*The heavens are telling the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of God's hands.*"

We'll conclude this series next Sunday with a focus on the element fire as we celebrate the fires of Pentecost, marking the birthday of the church.

Today then we have the mysterious fifth element as our theme. Some accounts of the classical elements omit the fifth element entirely, although most of them do make an attempt to reckon with it in the sense of reckoning with that part of existence which isn't encapsulated by the other elements, perhaps that part of existence which is non-physical and invisible. The ancient Greeks called it "ether" and they thought about it as a substance like pure air, the type of air that filled the universe beyond the sky. Ether as pure air was also the type of air that the gods were said to breathe.

By way of comparison, in the ancient Japanese account they name this element "void," which I think is perhaps a stronger and a more evocative way to think about it. The void—even just thinking about, or speaking, or hearing, or reading the word on a page can be, I think, an arresting experience. If you're anything like me, then the void is not something you tend to talk about much with others—it doesn't make for good cocktail party conversation, for example—and yet it's something that you think about nonetheless, and at times it's something that you feel the presence of.

While the void indicates the non-physical and invisible dimension to existence, that by no means suggests that the void doesn't exist. When we think of atomic physics, for example, we find that over 99% of every atom is made up of empty space, which by extension means that everything that exists, our bodies as much as the wooden pews in this church are, in the end, about 99% emptiness, about 99% void. Perhaps also you've heard about astrologists and cosmologists

starting to talk more and more about dark energy and about dark matter—we don't really know what this is yet, but our best hypothesis at the moment is that about 98% of the universe is dark in the sense of being invisible and non-observable, which is perhaps another way of saying that 98% of the universe is void-like.

Without a doubt though, the void is hard to talk about, so this is one of those weeks where I might have bit off more than I could chew, or may have waded into waters a bit too deep for me, but just maybe spending some time this morning considering the void, and lingering with it, and perhaps by the end even befriending it, might prove to be a spiritually beneficial exercise.

Rather than focusing on one scripture as we normally do, my path this morning will meander a bit through a few different parts of the Bible, and so I want to invite you also to let your mind wander a bit, which perhaps isn't the best advice a public speaker should give to a captive audience, but I think particularly with the void that we can sense it better when we let our guard down in a sense, and when we don't force the matter, but just sit with it—*"I and this mystery, here we stand,"* as Walt Whitman put it.

Since we're focusing these weeks on the basic elements of creation, a good place to start in the Bible is with the creation account in the book of Genesis, and when we begin at the beginning we find that within the first three verses there is already mention of all five of the elements, including a mention of the void in the very first sentence—*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.*

Perhaps the most unique aspect to the void here in comparison with the other elements is that the void can't be described in the same physical terms that the other elements can. We can talk about the solid, green earth, or about the cold running water, or we can look up and see the "blue true dream of sky." The void, though, we can't really see or describe it in and of itself, and so we have to look elsewhere for evidence of it.

We have to look elsewhere for evidence of it, and so also like the mystery of faith, we glimpse the void best in the ways that we react and respond to it. There's a famous painting by Caravaggio depicting the calling of St. Matthew that I think illustrates this well—in the painting Christ is a shadowy figure off to the side, lingering in the dark corner. We can tell that he's vaguely pointing towards a group of people sitting around a table, and we can tell particularly that Matthew thinks that Christ is pointing to him because Matthew sits up straight, the light from the window illuminating his surprised face, and he raises his own hand to

point to himself, the general expression being, *“Me? Are you pointing to me? Are you calling me?”* It’s a wonderful depiction of the mystery of faith, the mystery of God’s call and our response to God’s call, which is that we more often than not sense or see the call first in the response that it engenders—in the look of surprise, in the act of kindness, in the laugh, in the smile.

And so what about with the void—how do we respond to the void? This could be a very personal question this morning—how do *you* respond to the void? Do you check your email for the ten-hundredth time in the day? Do you check your phone? Do you say, not now Void, I have to do the dishes? Or do you say, Hey Void, you’re getting a little too close here, I’m going to go for a walk or a run to gain a little distance on you. We know that there are a million daily ways to fill the void, and yet as we also know there really isn’t any way to fill it. The philosopher Blaise Pascal put his finger on this when he said, *“There’s a God-shaped void within the heart of every human being.”* A God-shaped void—a void that only God can fill.

In addition to being a personal question, how we deal with the void also turns about to be an interesting cultural question. In our Western culture the void tends to carry with it many negative connotations, and living with a sense of the void is thought to be an unwanted condition. So for example, when you search for the meaning of void in Western psychology, pretty soon you’re dealing with descriptions such as boredom, social alienation, apathy, depression, loneliness, despair, grief, and on to various personality disorders, including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, borderline personality disorder, and schizoid personality disorder.

The prophet Jeremiah in the Hebrew Bible gives voice to this experience of void as a type of depression or despair when towards the beginning of his book he writes, *“My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh, the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent....I looked out on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light.”*

When we consider the experience of the void from an Eastern perspective, however, the difference couldn’t be more striking, as in Eastern philosophy the void takes on an emphatically positive and desired connotation—the void here being one of the ways of describing enlightenment, and as a way of describing the ideal state of mind, for in the Eastern view, a mind that has reached a state of void, that has completely emptied itself of all content or sense of self, has reached its purest state in terms of only then being able to mirror and reflect without distortion the true nature of reality.

The art that’s on the cover of this bulletin, for example, is a Zen Buddhist type of art called “enso,” which is an attempt to render an empty circle with a single, fluid,

expressive brushstroke. Enso is a type of art which some engage as a daily spiritual practice, with the well wrought enso symbolizing both absolute enlightenment, and also, with the empty space at the center, the void (mu).

I'm not the first to point out that there's often an Eastern ring to many of Jesus' teachings, and I wonder if Jesus was trying to get at a similar, more Eastern view of the void with his enigmatic teaching when he said, for example, that, *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it."* It strikes me as something very similar to what the Buddha would say, about how emptying our cluttered sense of self is the pathway to enlightenment.

I find this an amazing thing to consider, how one culture's description of depression and despair can match another culture's description of enlightenment and perfection; how one culture's void is something to a-void, whereas another culture's void is to be eagerly sought after, even as a daily spiritual goal to attain.

In the end, here's where I stand today in terms of thinking about the void—I think that spending some time consciously lingering with the void can be a useful spiritual practice, because I think both the Western and the Eastern traditions get something right about the void. From the Western tradition, I think we see that we should be mindful and careful of how we try to fill the void, for if we try to fill it with that which is less than God, we may wind up quickly facing despair. From the Western tradition, then, we have that great image from Pascal—that there's a God-shaped void within the heart of every person. But from the Eastern tradition I think we see that there can be a great benefit in terms of not being afraid of the void, and perhaps even as a type of spiritual practice, trying to befriend the void.

Returning again to the account in Genesis, I think we can glimpse there how the void is one of the most basic elements that God works in and through, which is a great reminder that God's creative presence is there, even in the void, even when all we might be experiencing at the moment is absence and emptiness.

And don't forget, we're still until next Sunday in the Easter season here, this season when we celebrate the mystery of the empty tomb, which, like the enso drawing, is another powerful symbol of the void, and which suggests to us that new life, that resurrection begins in the void.

There's a great story about the creativity or the generativity of the void that I'll end with. The story is about the author J.R.R. Tolkien, the author of the much beloved *Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* series. The story goes that Tolkien was in the middle of a marathon grading session, his desk overflowing with his student's papers. He was in the tedious process of picking up paper after paper,

reading with his teacher-eye the writing assignments of his students. And then he picked up the next page. And it was completely blank, usually the type of page that leads to writer's block, the blank page representing the type of emptiness or void that can leave us paralyzed. But yet when Tolkien picked up that blank page, the words immediately came to him, words which are now among the most famous first-sentences in English — *"In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit."*

It took him many months and years even to figure out what a hobbit was, and what this sentence meant, and where this line would lead, and yet, it all started here, with a blank page, an empty space, a quick encounter with the void.