

“When Time Didn’t Exist”

John 1: 1-14
“Time” from *God and the New Physics*
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I am going to admit up front that I don’t really know what I am talking about today. I am sure there are other times when you have questioned if I knew what I was talking about. But, most of the time I, at least, think I know what I am talking about even if you all know better. But, today I really honestly don’t know what I am talking about.

This week I have been thumbing through two books—one, *Einstein for Dummies* and two, *Einstein for Beginners*. Quite honestly, both books were too deep for me. So today I want to tell you what I read even though I don’t really understand it. And then I want to tell you what I do know: that this new scientific world just deepens the mystery of faith for us.

Here is what I discovered this week. You know how we usually think that time is a constant and we move through time at varying rates? One year is 365 days. One day is 24 hours. One hour is 60 minutes and one minute is 60 seconds. We think of time as being a constant and then each of us crams different amount of life into that time. That was Newtonian physics.

The science of the last 100 years turns that on its head. According to Einstein and the theory of relativity, what stays constant is the speed of light. It’s space and time that actually changes. What does this mean? There are some interesting experiments and theories. One such discovery came from taking a jet and flying it as low to the ground as possible where gravity is the strongest. If you start in San Francisco and you fly the jet around the world at a high enough speed, when you return to San Francisco the clocks in the airplane will actually be a couple of seconds slower than the clocks on the ground. What happens is that time actually slows down. The speed and the mass of our lives actually affect the rate of time. Does that blow your mind, or what?

There have been mathematical experiments where light travels two different distances but arrive at the same time. It used to be assumed that the light must have traveled at different speeds, but it has been discovered that the speed of light remains constant. What happened is that in this experiment time was actually in one instant that allowed for the two rays of light to travel different distances at the same speed, but arrive at the same time. Theories say that if we are traveling close to the speed of light our bodies will actually be seven times thinner and seven times heavier. That means I would be three inches wide and 1400 pounds. What’s amazing is that this isn’t some alternative world. This is the actual world we live in, but even the fastest among us have never challenged the speed of light.

Scientists are now questioning the whole assumption that we live in an ever-expanding universe. Although it appears that way to us the new science is not that the universe keeps expanding, but that time is actually slowing down. The example they use is that the universe is acting sort of like a clock running on a low battery. One scientist had this to say, “*We believe that time emerged during the Big Bang, and if time can emerge, it can also disappear - that's just the reverse effect.*”

I want to say again that I don’t understand any of this. Even the book, *Einstein For Dummies*, gave me a headache. So, please don’t come up afterwards and ask me to clarify because I don’t really know what I am talking about. I am just reporting to what I have read.

Where I do know what I am talking about, however, is the profound implications that this has for our faith.

Listen again to the preamble to the Gospel of John but, with the image of the Big Bang in your mind. Think about how everything we know and experience emerged out of a spontaneous moment of divine creation.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him (including space and time), and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” John 1: 1-5

All I really want to do today is to baffle your minds in the same way my mind is baffled. John starts out his gospel, **“In the beginning was the Word...”** and as we contemplate our world those words become more and more profound for us. In the beginning there was no space and time. Genesis says it this way, **“the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep.”** Remember in Exodus when Moses was concerned about being sent to face to the Pharaoh of Egypt. He asked God, **“Who should I say sent me?”** and God replied, **“I am who I am” sent you.** Another translation that also fits the Hebrew is, **“I am becoming who I am becoming” sent you.**

The point is God is really hard to pin down to certain descriptions or characteristics. We try to capture God’s story in this amazing account of God’s presence in Israel and in Jesus. We allow ourselves to get caught on whether God is getting a fair shake in our society, in our schools, and in our world. We get obsessed about our own lives and how we think the world should be run. And then we get these reminders that we are participating in the actual unfolding of the cosmos. **“In the beginning was the Word.”** The God who said, *“I am who I am”* has invited us to share in the making, the creation, and the evolution of this universe we live in.

Today when we join around the table for Communion think about what it means to be invited to be part of the story of the unfolding universe. We live in the most marvelous mysterious universe. We think we know how it all works. But, there was an age when space didn’t exist and time didn’t exist. There was an age when all there was was God and Being itself. We have been invited to join with the God who called Himself, **“I am who I am, I am becoming who I am becoming.”**

I admit that I don’t understand Einstein or the theory of relativity. I don’t understand how time can slow down. I don’t get how the speed at which I travel can make me thinner and heavier. What I do know is that this incredible mystery leaves us in one place. It leaves us in a religious frame of mind. It leaves us feeling deep awe for the mystery of life. It leaves us feeling wonder for the strange unfolding of God’s creation. And it leaves us in a place of gratitude.