

M. Michael Morse/ Preached at UUCF on Nov.28, 2021

This sermon was inspired by Ann Foard, former member of UUCF and beloved friend.

The End of Blue Boat Home...But not Yet

The year was 1961. A young 23 year old seminary student faced his first ministerial challenge following a church service he conducted. As he greeted people at the door of the sanctuary, a woman, perhaps in her 70's, lingered behind the rush of people leaving. Finally, she approached the young minister-to-be, and with tears in her eyes, said she was deeply troubled. "Well, " he said. "What are you troubled about?"

"The Russians sent Sputnik into space in 1957. And now our new President wants to send people to the moon. What will happen if one of those space vehicles flies into the wrong cloud and kills some angels?" With tears now flowing freely she said, "And worse yet, what if they fly into heaven and kill God!"

The young man was clearly taken aback and said simply, "We'll have to talk about this very soon." For whatever reason, they never did!

You know who the young man was. He sensed it was not the time to hit her with Paul Tillich and tell her that God is the ground of all being! That would have been snarky, but I have asked from time to time in the intervening years, how one might respond to someone whose own GROUND of being is threatened by space vehicles, whose faith is sincere, if simple, full of caring and empathy. Nurtured by a simplistic literalism that has been dominant for centuries, this woman was really addressing the question of what life means if it is about to come to a catastrophic end. She asked the question out of fear.

Lest you all think that just because that was 1961 we have all moved on and given up literalistic views, please hear words I read on Facebook from a relative (by marriage) just last week. "Happy 70th heavenly birthday Bubba. I sure do miss and love you so much. Hope you are having a big party with Jesus, Momma, Daddy, D.J., Davey and Frank. Give them all kisses for me."

We are rather used to asking the question from a different vantage point, namely how did we get here on this planet in the first place and what does it mean? The creation myth stories in Genesis are really the answer from that end. It is a metaphorical answer, however, and when literalized, it turns into nonsense in light of what we know about the cosmos in 2021. But let me be clear about one thing. The stories are exquisitely beautiful and provocative and meaningful and challenging. And bashing them out of hand, a practice of some UU's, is shameful. I personally love and cherish those mythic explanations of our beginnings, and when placed alongside the science of cosmology and astrophysics, they become all the more provocative. Rather than condemning, we need to allow our theology to evolve alongside science and help others do the same. It is meaning we are after. And the questions are more important than the answers. It's not about us. It's about all of life, of death, of energy, of light, of black holes, of universes, of all those things we understand only in part or not at all.

What we need are new, or at least updated, metaphors. That goes for both our beginnings and end. In honor of the elderly woman I failed to respond to 60 years ago, I invite us to plunge into the fray.

Author Katie Mack launches us in her humorous, insightful, profound book entitled THE END OF EVERYTHING,(astrophysically speaking). Not to worry. It's about five billion years away, more or less, or it could possibly be in the next five minutes, although that is highly unlikely. But when it happens the sun will swell, engulf the orbit of Mercury, maybe Venus, and the earth will become just a charred magna covered rock. The vastness of the event cannot help but make us realize that, all things considered, we are, as Katie Mack puts it, "A small sentimental speck of dust lost in a vast and varied universe."

It sort of began 13.8 billion years ago when the universe went from a state of unimaginable density to a rapidly expanding cosmic fireball to cooling matter and energy which were the seeds for stars and galaxies and...eventually in the scheme of things, all of us. It was not really a big bang, as we like to say, but more an explosive expansion of densely packed energy that was already there. It was more a transformation of energy into matter.

We use the term "Eternity." What does that really mean? We want to think that we, made really of stardust, will go on forever in some form or another that we

refer to as life. Who is to say. We have written as much in our sacred rituals. We have incorporated it into our belief systems. Katie Mack assures us, however, that we know positively that the death of the universe is final. Blue Boat Home no more! What does that then mean for us? For the living of these days? For having a purpose or setting goals, or trying to do good or ...you fill in the blanks.

Eschatology is the word we are looking for. It comes from the Greek and means end times or the end of the world as we know it. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have in common a vision of a final end of the world and a restructuring of everything so that good finally triumphs over evil and where there is a judgment that rewards those who have been faithful. In the Christian tradition, there is the apocalypse, or what is called The Revelation to John. Apocalypse means revelation. And getting to that ideal place where there is no suffering or mourning, or pain, you have to first wade through streets that are quite literally flowing with the blood of those destroyed by the final judgment. It is a veritable bloodbath perpetrated by a supposedly loving and just God. It is a scenario alive and well with the Reawaken America tour led by Alex Jones, Mike Flynn, and Clay Clark who believe that the end times are playing out before our very eyes as they call for insurrection.

What Katie Mack asserts will scare many people half to death. What Reawaken America is all about will scare many people half to death. Never mind that the universe we are part of will be gone in five billion years. We humans however, may obviously take care of business in a very short time. We can do it atomically, biologically, chemically, demographically ecologically, with fossil fuels, with greed, hate, ignorance, junk, killing,...Cynically, we might say that we just can't wait five billion years. Why not do it in 50 years?

Katie Mack jars us into a different kind of reality with an optimism that makes me jealous. Astrophysics has a fairly good idea of how it all ends, with more information being gathered even as we speak. For her, this is context. She says, "Exploring ...possibilities gives us a glimpse of the workings of science at the cutting edge, and allows us to see humanity in a new context. One which, in my opinion, can bring a kind of joy even in the face of total destruction. We are a species poised between an awareness of our ultimate insignificance and the ability to reach far beyond our mundane, into the void, to solve most fundamental mysteries of the cosmos." pg.5

What is described cosmologically and astrophysically by Katie Mack screams at me two things: humility and life in the moment. This moment. This is what we've got folks. There is not a heaven, a place out there, even with Bubba, nor an exciting hell down there. Jesus is not coming again to be an imperial king, There is no such thing as an interventionist God, though we may wish for one. One more thing screams out at me with great urgency. Religious bodies, both individually and corporately, need to begin developing new metaphors of understanding, and reshaping old metaphors that no longer work. New metaphors for God, for instance. Tillich took a crack at that in the 20th century. And others have along the way. Jack Spong speaks of God as the Source of Life, not as in the Creation myth, but scientifically in the energy of the cells that make up our bodies, giving us consciousness, the ability to define life and destiny, to determine meaning. Spong stretches this into God is the Source of love. I'm not sure that one will fly very far, although I like it..

If we be not fatalists and declare, "What's the point of it, if it's all coming to an end," then we've got to do the hard work of re-imagining what life in the present can really be. We have got to write the best sentence we can. But I am adamant about one thing. We've got to replace the old literalisms with something so powerful that those who live in fear will not be destroyed in the process. We cannot tear down the old metaphors or simplistic literalisms without suggesting something more powerful to put in their place. People who live in fear, or people who already feel uncared-for, or dispossessed, or denied deserve at least that. A people who are alive today deserve more than a non-existent wished for heaven for escape from a world/earth/place that gives them nothing but suffering.

I thought about all of this in a different way this past week with the conviction of those who murdered Ahmaud Arbery. The black community gathered after the verdict, including his mother, and spoke to the media. "God is good." Praise the Lord. God is good." I asked myself what they might have said if the verdict had gone the other way and the men were acquitted. That is most often the case in trials like this one. Would they have said, "God is not good!"? "Or, "God has failed us."? Of course not. So, I took that God-talk apart. It's about justice. It's about caring. It's about undoing, as Eugene Robinson has suggested, the legacy of lynching that lives just as strongly in 2021 as it did in 1940. The metaphor for God is justice and compassion, the hand of universe stretched out pulling all people into the beloved community.

In 1940 a poet named Katherine Garrison Chapin wrote a Ballad Poem for a chorus entitled AND THEY LYNCHED HIM ON A TREE. The New York Philharmonic Orchestra played this balad as part of a work celebrating Dvorak New World Symphony and the way many of his themes reflect the black liberaation experience. The final chorus of that poem.

They left him hanging for the world to pass by, but another sun will rise in a clearer sky. And a new day of justice will dawn on the land.

Cut him down from the gallows tree!
Cut him down for the world to see.
Call him brother and take his hand
And clear the dark shadow that falls across your land
The long dark shadow, the long dark shadow.

O trust your brother and reach out your hand!
And clear the shadow, the long dark shadow
And clear the shadow that falls across your land!
Amen!