

Creation: Stardust to Human to...

From the series: Once Upon a Time...

Text: Genesis 1:1-5, 26-27; Ephesians 4:1-16

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

[Beginning remarks to the community about last week's David Ray Griffin lectures on his book, *Reenchantment Without Supernaturalism: A Process Philosophy of Religion* during the Center for Religion and Life weekend]

I do this morning want to say something that will enable you ... to know that you had in your midst this outstanding scholar whose scholarship is not an intellectual curiosity as an end in itself, but very practically in order to learn how to say *God* today and how to understand that Infinite Mystery, that Divine Presence, the sacred and the holy in a world such as we understand our reality today.

For, really, our storybook, our ancient text, the Bible, comes from an ancient people and ancient languages that understood the world altogether differently than we did. They had no knowledge of the physical universe as we do, and so their image of God, their imaginings of God were quite other than those which we would have if we would try to think of God in the light of the cosmos as we understand it and in the light of our human experience.

Probably most people don't even think about that - how to speak of God, to think of God, how to live a human existence, given the world as it is. Probably most don't even think about that until maybe they pray passionately for the life of a child and the child dies. Or, plead with God for something else which never comes to fruition, and then get to wondering about the suffering in the world and maybe something as horrible as the Holocaust. And then maybe, in moments of solitude, there would come a question - Where is God? Who is God? Is God at all?

David Ray Griffin's work is to try to give us an opening on that eternal transcendent dimension which is not other than our world, but is a part of our world.

This morning I intended anyway to begin a new series of messages. When I set these series far in advance, eventually as the time comes, I can twist them any way. So, I am going to keep with the series title, *Once Upon a Time ...*, because I

want to call to your mind immediately that the things we are going to talk about, and we are going to go to the book of Genesis for these messages, are stories. "Once upon a time..." for the ancient religious storytellers were dealing with those ultimate questions and that ultimate reality - Why is there something rather than nothing? What does it mean to be human? Who am I? Whence have I come and whither am I going and what does it all mean? Those ultimate questions lived before the rather fearsome reality of a mystery that can never be penetrated. Those early human religious figures, dreamers, poets told stories, and we have a story, too, and our story is precisely that. So, once upon a time...

Once upon a time, there were Hebrew dreamers and poets and prophets who believed that all that is was the consequence of a word of the creator God who called it all into being. And that creative act was by a God who was not a part of the created order, but stood above it and continued to guide it and providentially to move it and here and there, now and again, to intervene in it and to interrupt its processes, if necessary. That belief in a supernatural being we speak of as *theism*, God "out there," tweaking the creation which that God called into being. That was the ancient picture, the old story, and we read it again a moment ago.

But, in this particular message, I entitle it "Creation: Stardust to Human to..." because we have come to know that we are a part of a cosmic process of 15 billion years. Whether it is 15 or 14 or 16, we won't argue. But, we have come to know that all that is part and parcel of the same thing, that this cosmic process has been evolving and unfolding with new emergence over billions of years, and that the stuff that we are is the stuff of the universe, that we human beings are made of star-stuff, the explosion of those marvelous stars that sprinkle the inky darkness of the night, that explode and seed the planets and the galaxies with the elements that are the elements of life. And all reality is uniformly a part of that explosive explosion of elements and, amazing miracle of miracles, those elements at some point came alive. Was it an amoeba or an algae or a moss? I don't know, but it was life, that point of life with no one there to witness it. And then, greater miracle of all, that life again, over billions of years, eventuating in conscious life, self-consciousness, consciousness of the other, community, human community. And here we are.

Someone has said if you took that 15 billion years and collapsed it into one year so that you had the whole 15 billion years with all of the markers that can be marked as to what developed when and so forth, all of human recorded history would have arrived in the last 15 seconds of the last minute. The last 15 seconds of the last minute. That's who we are - we are Johnny-come-latelies, we are newcomers. We are a recent emergent in this whole cosmic process, and there is nothing about us that is any different than that which was part of the process 12 billion years ago, 14,15 billion years ago, and it is absolutely an amazing thing. In an expanse of time we cannot take in, in an expanse of space that is simply beyond our comprehension, there is one process going on: billions of galaxies and billions of stars, and this little planet earth in the midst of the solar system, in the

midst of a galaxy just a speck, just a spinning mud heap, just a pile of rocks, and here we are human beings, conscious, reflecting on it all. That's amazing! That is really a miracle.

David Ray Griffin is simply one of those thinkers who thinks about all of that, and he has taken in what all of the sciences tell us about that reality, and the philosopher who has informed his work, Alfred North Whitehead, is one who said, at the beginning of this century, the problem with the modern period is that it has separated matter and mind, or matter and spirit, and a consequence of that in the modern period has been a kind of an absolute materialism with no one knowing what to do with spirit or even denying its existence.

But, Alfred North Whitehead has said, the thing is that that matter is inspirited. The whole thing is permeated, is shot through with spirit, with consciousness, and it is on that kind of radically "new" conception of reality, although we can go all the way back to Plato 600 years before Christ to find echoes of that as well, that he is trying to say: *in this totality of which we are a part, God is fully present in it all, and there is a creative spirit nudging and moving, but not coercing or forcing, but beckoning, persuading.*

The lure of love, if you will, seems to be the way of the cosmos and, among human beings that we are, thinking, conscious, aware, one day one was born and those who encountered him said, "That's it. That must be the divine intention for the human." In the beginning was that divine intention and all things came into being through that one, and in the fullness of time that divine intention became flesh, human, and no one has ever seen God, but that one, that one reveals who God is. That is our story because we say, concretely, there was a human being. To look upon that one was to look upon the face of God. *And so incarnation or embodiment: this spirit that inspirits everything becomes concrete in the human form.*

The mistake the Church made was to say it happened once for all in him. The fact is that it happened in him in order that we might know that it happens in everyone at all times, that it is the human that is the embodiment of the divine, that that infinite spirit has become concretized in the human being, and that human being in Jesus. Those who saw him said, "That is human."

"Stardust to human," human paradigmatically, preeminently in Jesus who is our pattern. And then my title says, also, three dots, "Stardust to Human to ..." To what? Are we the apex of it all? Are we the summit of it all? Are we the end of it all? Or, is there something more? Is there another stage?

Let me tell you where we are today. We who have lately come on the scene, we "last 15 seconds" human pride, let me tell you where we are today. The nation stands on the brink of war, and great religious leaders, the Pope, the Dalai Lama, and others, the Catholic Conference of Bishops, the National Council of Churches, heads of denominations - all across the board, except the Southern Baptists and

Jerry Falwell, but otherwise quite uniformly across the board all have said war is not the answer, war is not the solution, go slowly, go cautiously. Nobody is listening. I know that we religious leaders really don't deserve any real attention because what do we know? The face in a book, dealing with sweet communities of people, what do we know about the real world? I almost find it a little humorous when I think about the universality of the spiritual counsel and the total disregard. It wasn't always that way. But, if you want to know the impact of the spiritual community in today's world, you have a parable before you. Nobody gives a rip about what the Church is saying. But, I have a little stripe of cynicism in me, so I don't always trust myself.

I have been saying that this whole thing is really, finally, about oil. And then, praise be to God, yesterday's *Grand Rapids Press* headline was: "Seidman Bullish on War." William Seidman, local boy who has made good, at age 81 now comes back to Grand Rapids to speak to some business leaders about matters similar to insider trading, only this is the inside information to a few folks. It's at the Peninsular Club, a nice place to eat. I'll bet you President Bush could shoot him, because he has let the cat out of the bag. "Seidman Bullish on War" - that's an obscene headline. The article says that he claims that defeating Saddam Hussein and controlling Iraqi oil is at least as important as eliminating weapons of mass destruction. Now, you are getting it from an insider who says that it is political rhetoric about the weapons of mass destruction and the locus of evil that therefore needs to be wiped out. He is really telling us you're just being played because it is not about mass destruction weapons. It is about oil. He goes on to say that it would never deepen the bear market (that's a misleading reading of the market - war, that is). "Oil prices fluctuating is a very large drag on the economy, ours and the world's, said Seidman. If we are in Iraq, nobody can use oil as a weapon. I think probably the most bullish thing I can think of today is winning the war. We are planning to set up a MacArthur-like government," referring to Japan after World War II, "getting control of that oil, thereby gaining sway with neighboring Saudi Arabia's oil production will make a vast difference to the economy in all sorts of areas, but particularly the price of oil. Having the two major oil producers not part of any radical Muslim or any other unfriendly government," he said, "would be a huge additional factor in the world's economy." And then, and this is the clincher, he said he's not surprised that the Bush administration is not the one heralding a return to profitability by way of war. Oh, really? The administration is not saying that by way of war we could return to profitability? No, he's not surprised they are not doing that. Neither am I. But, he says, "I deny it specifically on behalf of the government," he said, joking. That's obscene.

Now you have the whole religious world trying to whisper in somebody's ear, and nobody's listening. But, you have an insider coming back to say finally, folks, the talk is about eliminating weapons of mass destruction, but finally it's about oil, because finally it is about the economy, because finally it is about beating the bear market and returning to profitability. And you know what? It might work. I

may yet be able to retire. It could work. We could go in there and maybe if we're successful, maybe we'll knock the stuffing out of Saddam and maybe we'll be able to establish our own puppet government there and maybe, over years, maybe, maybe, maybe ... But, you see what we're doing? We are the superpower and we can act unilaterally. We can have our way in the world. Do you want to be with us or against us? Well, we don't believe in what you are doing. Do you want to support us or not? We'll go to the United Nations and we will use the United Nations if it works, but if it doesn't work, we'll do it alone. And we might pull it off. But, don't you see that if we pull it off one more time, we will not have solved anything except the present generation's prosperity?

What about the rest of the Muslim world? Why are we the victims of terrorism? Is terrorism not the technique of those who have no power? And is there any power in the world that could protect against terrorism? So there is the irony that here we are, wealthy, powerful, top of our game, and we live with fear. We live with as much fear as a nation as the people around Washington D.C. are living in fear of a sniper right now. That is the kind of irrationality that cannot be defended against. Yet, we can go in there and we can square things around, and we can dominate and we can hold on powerfully enough, long enough, perhaps, to pull it off for the likes of us for another generation, but, eventually, don't we know eventually it is only justice and compassion that can ever solve the anguish and the agony of the world? Don't we realize the cynicism of this world that talks about being born again and about Jesus, only to go to war, when Jesus said blessed are the peacemakers and the merciful and the gentle? Don't we know what a mockery it is to be called a Christian nation when we are no more ready, even though we are the superpower that would have it within us to change the game, that we will continue one more time to use our power and, if need be, violence and war? And the secret is out. ... I'll bet they could kill him for letting the cat out of the bag and confirming what some of us have worried about all the time.

The passion of David Ray Griffin's life right now is global democracy. He is working now on a book in which he suggests, if there were an objective, neutral observer who was good, who had all of the facts and who could adjudicate the human situation, wouldn't that be good? And after all of his philosophical and theological explorations, it is the God reflected in the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount for whom he sees room in this cosmic process of 15 billion years. What we need is not a little tweaking of the system. What we need is a transformation of human consciousness.

What do you think? I'm just blowing bubbles, huh? I'm just blowing smoke. I'm just another idealistic romanticist. I'm just another preacher. But, unless there is a transformation of human consciousness that gains a critical mass that revolutionizes the way we are human with each other, we will keep on in our tribal ways and we will keep killing each other and we will continue to be afraid.

References:

David Ray Griffin. *Reenchantment Without Supernaturalism: A Process Philosophy of Religion*. Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion, 2000.