

Daniel 7: 1-3, 15-18
Creekside COB
November 4, 2006

“Forever and Ever... and Ever”

I'm about to do what I have no business doing, given the breadth of today's theme and the time allotted to say it. I will wrestle with ultimates. In church, we consider things of ultimate value every Sunday, and we can't get more ultimate than God. But not content to be a concept, or object for our philosophical speculation, or a cold, stone idol in some shrine, God became comprehensible, approachable, and personal to the radical extent of befriending us in Jesus of Nazareth.

Understanding is essential, but there is something to be said for becoming sufficiently small before life's imponderables. Grappling with incomprehensible realities is a good exercise for spiritual fitness.

Let's consider time. What is it? Does time exist, or do yesterday, today, and forever exist only in our minds? St. Augustine was a philosopher and a Christian theologian. In *The Confessions* he said: "*What then is time?* If no one asks me, I know; if I wish to explain it to him who asks, I know not... My soul yearns to know this most entangled enigma. I confess to Thee, O Lord, that I am as yet ignorant what time is."

A verse from the book of Daniel causes me to ponder, the length of "forever." I have an insight about forever. It is a very long time. Tack on two or three more "evers" and it's even longer! Some insight, huh? But how long *is* forever? How can we measure eternity?

God put the earth in the spiral Milky Way galaxy. It contains some 200 billion stars and measures 100,000 light years across. Remember, light travels at 186,000 miles per second.

Astronomers estimate there are 100 billion visible galaxies containing 100 billion stars each, give or take a billion or two. If you want to do the math, this multiplies out to 10,000 billion billion stars! The largest structure ever observed is a string of galaxies 700 million light years long, located a mere 200 million light years from the earth.

We can't grasp such numbers, so we make analogies. A wise man was asked, "How long is eternity?" He replied, "There is a mountain the size of Mt. Everest. It is made of solid diamond. Once every thousand years a little bird flies to the mountain *and brushes it once with it's wing*. By the time the bird wears the mountain down to nothing, the first second of eternity will have passed."

When we try to grasp such amazing things we can feel overwhelmed and insignificant. When the Psalms were written there was no knowledge of the scope of the universe, but they knew they were small. In Psalm 8, the psalmist gazed at the stars he asked, "*Lord, what are we that you should care about us?*"

If the universe is only a vacuum of endless time and space, we are just insignificant specks of dust. If the universe is a vast void, then we are hopeless pawns of fear. The Jewish psychologist Victor Frankl understood this well. While in a Nazi concentration camp he gained an insight-- "People who cannot see the end cease to live for the future and therefore exist altogether without hope."

As children we heard the story of Daniel and the lion's den, but Daniel wasn't a lion tamer. He was a dreamer, and his dreams were premonitions. Once he dreamed of four great beasts coming from the ocean-- a lion with eagle eyes, a bear with bones in its mouth, a leopard with four wings and heads, and a hideous dragon with ten horns and iron teeth. He was terrified, and when he asked what it meant he was told that the beasts were the empires of the Babylonians, the Medes, the Persians, and Greeks.

Then Daniel got an antidote to fear. He was told, “Don’t get all worked up. The saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever—forever and ever... and for good measure, throw in few more evers.” Notice that the empires come “out of the earth,” while the power given to God’s holy ones comes “from on high.”

Daniel saw a bigger picture. The future did not belong to Babylon or Persia, as he feared. Their kings did not rule the world. Kings, rulers, premiers, presidents, generals, and corporations throw their weight around as though their power matters in the long run. Political régimes and administrations come and go, but time is in God’s hands and ultimate outcomes are in God’s control.

On All Saints Day we see the big picture. There’s so much going on in the world to makes us afraid, and when we’re afraid we become puppets of the powers. The day after 9/11 we were told the best way to show the terrorists we weren’t afraid was by going shopping! In exchange for being uncritical and not asking tough questions Homeland Security will take protect you. All Saints began in the in the forth century to draw the attention of the church to all the saints of the Most High who belong to a kingdom that lasts forever and ever and ever.

We offer our gratitude for the saints who passed on the message of Jesus and the traditions of the church. We remember the inheritance they have given, and consider that we are a church because of the commitments and sacrifices they offered. By watching them we learned what it meant to be Christians. Today the choir sang about the legacy of faith we have received—a legacy handed to us by saints named Jan and Walter, people who lived their common days in an uncommon spirit that continues forever and ever.

All Saints isn’t only about what we have received, but the legacy we pass on. You probably don’t see yourself as a saint, because we all behave in “unsaintly” ways. But a saint is defined as anyone for whom Jesus died—anyone who lives for him, anyone whose citizenship is in his Kingdom, anyone who asks for power

to live *unnaturally* in this world... being poor in spirit, meek, hungering for justice, merciful, pure in heart and peacemakers.

Barbara Brown Taylor is an Episcopal priest who is fascinated by new insights of science. We are learning that we belong to a web of creation in which absolutely nothing is inconsequential. Just listen: "Every one of us will change the world, whether we mean to or not. All it takes is a factor of .000127. Shift anything in the world that much and you may be the catalyst that turns a monsoon into a blue sky (or the other way around). Pick up some stranger's crying baby at exactly the right moment and that baby may turn out to be an artist instead of a tyrant. Cough at the wrong moment and you may make someone lose a game of pool of Mars. You just never know."

God's saints are meant to change the world. Who knows who made a decision long ago that made the difference in your life today? Who knows what may happen to some person tomorrow because you will behave like a Christian this afternoon? Who knows the ripple effect that a decision made by our church will have upon the church 100 years from now.

One thing is for certain. Nothing that has been done by saints in the past, and nothing we will do for saints who will live in the future is inconsequential. It only takes a little shift and the faith that the saints of the Most High will receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever--forever and ever.