

## A Star Trek Christmas

John 1:1-5; John 21:25

I begin with a disclaimer. I'm not exactly a science fiction nerd. Just ask my science fiction nerd wife. I sometimes get Star Wars and Star Trek confused. But there is a short story by the preeminent science fiction writer Ray Bradbury which has stayed in my mind for decades. It's about a Star Trek-ing Jesus going from planet to planet, galaxy to galaxy on his way through the universe to share his light, love and way. And it's about two space travelers who are in pursuit.

Are we alone in the universe? Some Christians are threatened by such a question; theirs is a one-planet God! But the God of the Bible has been trying to get through to us the message: Our God is not a local God! Is there extra-terrestrial life? There's been increased conversation recently about possible UFO sightings. I like the poster from X-Files: "The Truth is Out There!"

I've always been captivated by the words John wrote at the end of his Gospel:

But there are many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. (John 21:25)

There's been no end to stories about Jesus throughout history, and here's a science fiction writer 2,000 years later fascinated by the Jesus story. My sermon today begins with a retelling of Bradbury's story.

## I

The rocket ship from earth slowly made its descent and landing on a strange planet. Two men stepped out of the ship: Captain Hart and Lt. Martin.

Captain Hart looked at his watch. "An hour ago we landed here, and no welcoming committee, no brass band, nothing! We ride millions of miles through space, and the fine citizens of some silly town on some unknown planet ignore us!"

Hart ordered Lt. Martin to go into town and find out why no one was interested in them. Martin returned visibly shaken.

Hart said, "Well, are they going to welcome us?!"

"No."

"Why not?"

"We're not important", said Martin. "Something happened yesterday in that city, something so big and important that we're second fiddle."

The Captain angrily chewed his cigar. "What happened?"

Martin replied, "It's hard to explain. Sir, a remarkable man appeared: good, intelligent, compassionate, infinitely wise, a man for whom they had waited for a

long time— a million years maybe. He walked into their town yesterday, and today our rocket ship means nothing. He didn't have a name; his name would be different on every planet."

"What so called wonderful things did the man do?"

"For one he healed the sick, he comforted the poor, he fought dishonesty and hypocrisy and dirty politics, and sat among the people talking through the day."

Hart said, "You don't mean— you can't mean that this man was....?" And he stopped.

Martin nodded. "That's what I mean, Sir."

"I don't believe it," the Captain said. "This man is that criminal, Burton, who flew in from some planet yesterday to trick the people here!"

The two ran into town. The Captain demanded witnesses. He found the mayor and demanded: "What did he look like?"

The mayor replied, "That would be hard to say. Opinions differ slightly—he was gentle, kind, wise, loving."

Hart spat back: "Generalizations! I want proof! What proofs of the healings do you have?"

Of course, none of the ones healed could give him positive proof. So Captain Hart remained in cold disbelief.

Lt. Martin, angry at the Captain's cruel cynicism, said, "I've had enough! Leave this people alone! They've got something good and decent, and you come and foul their nest and sneer at it. I've gone through the town and seen the light on their faces, and they've got something you'll never have— a little simple faith, and they'll move mountains with it. You, you're boiled because someone stole your act, got here ahead of you and made you unimportant."

Hart still was convinced that the man was the interplanetary criminal come to dupe the people of this planet. "He'll fleece them soon enough!"

But when they returned to the ship, they received the radio message that Burton had died two days before. His explanation now shattered, the Captain ran back to the mayor of the village. Martin followed.

When Captain Hart reached the mayor he demanded to know where the man was. "He's gone, I guess," said the mayor.

"Where is he?", shouted the Captain.

"Each one finds him in his own way," replied the mayor.

Hart pulled his gun. "Tell me where he is, or I'll shoot."

The mayor, of course could not; the gun cracked, and the mayor fell to the ground, his arm injured.

Hart said, I don't need you. If I missed him by one day here, I'll go to another world, then another. I'll miss him by half a day there, and then on another by a few hours, or ten minutes, but I'll catch up. Come on, Martin!"

Lt. Martin replied, "I'm staying. Something good has happened here. These people have experienced something real, and life has meaning. This is for me. This is what I came looking for."

Captain Hart looked at Martin and the mayor. "Fools," he blurted out and took off in search of the man.

"Poor man, he's gone", said the mayor. "And he'll go to planet after planet, seeking and seeking and always he'll be an hour late or half an hour, or ten minutes, or one minute—and then by just a few seconds. And when he is 80 years old, he will still be looking on and on, thinking to find what he left behind here on this planet, in this city"

And there the story ends. Or does it?

## II

The Prologue of the Gospel of John tells of the Word of God present at the beginning of the Cosmos. Some call this the Cosmic Christ. And this Christ, John writes, became flesh and dwelt among us in Jesus of Nazareth.

But are there other worlds and other Christs and other inhabited planets in the Universe created by God? NASA scientists are saying that the odds are

increasing that there are inhabitable planets throughout the Cosmos, planets, like earth, which lie in what scientists term “habitable zones” like ours, just the right distance from their sun. Might our Jesus be a star-trekking Christ going from planet to planet to offer that world what he offered us here?

It may be a crazy speculation, but why would not the God of the Cosmos want the Word that brings life and light to be present where ever there is human-like life? There is our search for God, and there is what Rabbi Abraham Heschel called “the God in search of us.” An old Presbyterian hymn probes this mystery:

I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew  
 He moved my soul to seek Him, seeking me;  
 it was not I that found, O Savior true;  
 no, I was found of Thee.

That is the miracle of the Incarnation: God has come seeking us in the Christ.

### III

But today I also want to use Ray Bradbury’s story to ponder the thing called faith. We have two opposite responses from the characters, Captain Hart and Lt. Martin, responses worth a second look, but the mystery of how each of us come to faith is much more nuanced, and different from person to person. We were all uniquely fashioned by God, as variably and singly as our DNA. Any parent who has more than one child knows this!

For some the journey of faith is the mind's journey where in face of the coming of Christ, things in their minds finally click into place. That was the way of C.S. Lewis whose writings have helped many along, especially those who hit the world, *brain first*. Their leap of faith is a leap of thought.

For some, the journey opens in the experience of awe and wonder at the vastness and beauty of the Universe, and then they begin to seek the Maker of worlds and later discover the one who showed us God's face. David Brooks, the NY Times columnist and TV political commentator, is one of the ones who hits the world brain first, but in his recent article describing his long journey to faith, he writes that it was not intellectual persuasion that was the tipping point for him but rather some experiences of awe and wonder.

For others it is the experience of a human love so deep and unexpected that begins the path of faith, human love leading them to divine love.

For some faith is discovered in action, in doing something. For them, the leap of faith is a leap of action. A man wrote the noted Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose words have opened up faith for many: "I cannot believe? What advice would you give me?" Hopkins wrote a two-word answer, "Give alms."

So variously do we do we come to God and God comes to us.

#### IV

But there is one more dimension to Bradbury's story that stirs my mind and heart. When you think of the millions of years that this Universe has existed, and consider, as the Apostle Peter wrote, that in the Eternity of God, a thousand years is but a day (2 Peter 3:8), then we, like Captain Hart and Lt. Martin, have missed Jesus by just a day. And we too, like them, have only the testimony of those who have met him. There are the witnesses in the gospels and the New Testament whose lives were changed in the meeting of him. And we have what Malcolm Muggeridge, a crusty old journalist who came late to faith, called "The Third Testament", the witness of extraordinary women and men through history whose lives have been transformed by Christ and whose transformed lives have made a difference in countless other lives.

How shall we respond this day to the testimony of all these people? There are people in this room and in your lives who have inspired and encouraged you into faith. Shall we stay here, as Lt. Martin did, and say "This is for me!" Or, go on looking? Someone has said, "You can put off making up your mind, but you cannot put off making up your life." I think we can be seekers and believers at the same time, not settling for an inadequate faith, but always seeking for a faith adequate for your life, one that takes into account all your life.

Every day we choose and choose again whom we will follow; every day we can choose for Christ in the daily decisions we make. His way, or another way?

Jesus said to Peter the night of his arrest, “...and when you are *converted again*, turn again, strengthen your brothers and sisters.” (Luke 22:32) Following Jesus requires a life-time of conversions, and a being born again and again.

There is that “first turning” to Christ, which is, as I’ve said before, this: *to give as much of yourself as you can to as much of Christ as you know*. Then begins the adventure of discipleship, of the following: discovering more and more of yourself to give, and learning more and more of Christ to give yourself to. The possibilities are endless. Ready?

Amen.