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What some of you may *not* know is that William Shatner, the actor who played Captain Kirk, pursued a similar mission earlier this week in real life. For 11 minutes, he went where no 90 year old man has gone before: into space!

Shatner did it aboard the New Shepherd, a suborbital spacecraft built by Blue Origins. By the end, he traveled nearly 350,000 feet above the surface of the earth, reaching a maximum velocity of 2,235 mph. It was astounding, a journey fit for a captain!

Today I want to return to another beginning – not to the beginning of a mission into space, as was the case with Star Trek, but to the beginning of space itself.

According to the dominant scientific theory, the universe began around 13.8 billion years ago with a “Big Bang.” Out of this colossal explosion would come all of the contents of the cosmos, its moons and stars, its planets and (eventually) its people.

For years I thought I understood the theory: space and time have always existed; the Big Bang simply filled it with matter and energy.

I was wrong.

What a Difference a Metaphor Makes

Big Bang theory, in contrast to the idea that space has always existed, claims that space itself had a beginning. The explosion that started it all did not introduce stars and planets into the empty void of a universe that already existed; it introduced *space itself into existence*, and with space came time.

Are you confused? Perhaps you should be, but not for the reason you might think. You see, the problem with Big Bang theory in my view is not the science; it's with the *metaphor* science uses to explain it.

Consider the following: instead of speaking of the universe's origin as a Big Bang, why not think of it as a Big Bubble? In the beginning, one where truly nothing existed (not even empty space), an ever-expanding bubble containing space and time suddenly appeared. This bubble encapsulated the "bang" that took place within it. As temperatures from bang within the bubble cooled, the coalescence of subatomic particles and atoms would eventually lead to the appearance of matter.

The rest was *cosmic* history.

The Singularity and the Sacred

What I have just described hopefully makes sense. Regardless of the metaphor we use, the theory remains the same. We know the universe is expanding, that galaxies – like continents – are drifting apart. If we extrapolate this "cosmic expansion backwards in time using the known laws of physics, the theory describes an increasingly concentrated cosmos preceded by a singularity in which space and time lose meaning (typically named 'the Big Bang singularity')" (Wikipedia, accessed 10/14/21).

Now, when I first heard about the Big Bang singularity, probably while watching the movie *Interstellar* back in 2014, my immediate thought was God. Think about it. Classical theology teaches that God resides beyond space and time. Space and time, in other words, lose meaning when applied to God. How is this any different than the "singularity" posited by science?

Maybe the singularity is sacred.

In a famous analogy, a theologian compared God to the sentinel in a watchtower. Below Him stretches a long road which symbolizes time. As travelers on the road, each of us experience it moment for moment, step by step. We can certainly look back on our journey to survey the past. Likewise, we can look ahead to anticipate the future. Nevertheless, we are always "stuck" in the present. Like the guard in the watchtower, however, God can see the entire road. He exists, as it were, above time. He sees it all at once.

Of course, when God descends from the watchtower to join us in the person of Christ, God's experience of time presumably changes. But that's a problem for Christian theology. I still have a question about the science. Perhaps you do too: into what is the universe expanding?

Let's go back to the bubble. Its expansion represents the ever-increasing size of the universe, but what lies beyond it? If you were standing on the edge of the cosmos and you threw a rock into the "realm" that lies beyond it, what would happen to the rock? Would it bounce back, or would it simply disappear in the film of the bubble itself?

Since space and time have no meaning beyond the Bubble or before the Big Bang, language falters. Words like realm, beyond, before, after, or outside do not apply.

What a cosmic conundrum! Forget the scientist. Maybe we do need a theologian.

The Contribution of a Kabbalist

In 1572, an epidemic swept through Safed, a small village of Jewish inhabitants "perched," as the scholar Daniel Matt puts it, "high above the sea of Galilee, commanding immense vistas" (*The Essential Kabbalah*, p. 13). Among its victims was 38 year-old Isaac Luria, a master of what "had become an important spiritual factor in Jewish life," namely, the Kabbalah, a collection of texts containing a labyrinth of secret teachings about God.

Luria was famous for one teaching in particular. He had a totally unprecedented theory about how God created the universe.

In the beginning, he claimed, only God existed. God's being extended in all directions, as it were, permeating everything. There was nothing other than God outside of God or within God, for God was "all in all" (see 1 Cor 15:28). This seems conventional enough, but it presented a problem. "If [God] pervaded all space, how was there room for anything other than God to come into being" (*ibid.*, pp. 14-15)?

The answer Luria gave is fascinating: God had to withdraw; God had to pull back. God had to create a void within Himself to allow something other than God to exist. Gershom Scholem, a Luria scholar, explains it beautifully:

“God was compelled to make room for the world by . . . abandoning a region within Himself, a kind of mystical primordial space from which He withdrew in order to return to it in the act of creation and revelation” (McCullough qtd. Scholem, *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil*, p. 88).

To come back to the image I have been using, God created a bubble at the center of His being which opened up the space necessary for the universe to exist. Beyond the bubble, therefore, we find nothing but God.

Something Went Wrong

Luria’s theory coincides surprisingly well with modern science. It also provides an answer to the problem of evil. By pulling back, God opened up a space for something other than God to exist; that included the possibility of suffering and evil, both of which arose as a by-product of God’s self-limitation. (This was important to Luria. The Jews had faced persecution throughout the sixteenth century, in part because of their expulsion from Spain in 1492. Now God need not be held responsible.)

We know, then, the first part of the process. God withdrew to create a space for the universe to exist. But what about creation itself?

Luria had an answer: into the bubble God made within Himself, God projected a ray of creative light. Unfortunately, an accident occurred. Some of the vessels carrying the light could not withstand its intensity. They burst. Part of the light they carried returned to its source in God. “The rest,” Matt explains, “fell as sparks along with the shards of the vessels.

Eventually these sparks became trapped in material existence. The human task it to liberate or raise these sparks, to restore them to [their source in God.] This process of *tiqqun* (repair or mending) is accomplished through living a life of holiness” (Matt, p. 15).

Luria teaches, in short, that through their actions human beings play a role in helping God heal and restore a broken cosmos.

In Christian terminology, we could say something similar: by caring for and serving others as Christ did, we work with God to bring about God’s kingdom. We partner with God to achieve what God originally intended for this broken/fallen world, which brings us to our Gospel reading for today.

God's Kingdom

Mark makes clear the purpose of Jesus' ministry from the beginning. "Jesus came to Galilee," he writes, "proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news'" (1:14-15).

Jesus, we soon discover, is more than a voice crying out in the wilderness proclaiming God's coming reign. He enacts it. Shortly after announcing its forthcoming arrival, he begins manifesting it by healing people with various diseases, freeing them from the powers of affliction as symbolized by his exorcism of demons and the liberation from sin's power which comes through repentance.

By the middle of the next chapter, Jesus has inaugurated a totally new state of affairs by restoring people to wholeness and turning the social world of those in power upside down. We see this especially in chapter ten, which serves as the culmination of what God's emerging reign will look like. There an argument occurs within the ranks of his closest followers. James and John want honor. They want to be at the top, sitting next to Jesus in heaven. Jesus, however, makes clear the cost of their discipleship.

Jesus starts by indicating what will happen to them if they truly desire to follow him. They will drink from his cup (Mark 10:38) which is synonymous with martyrdom. Their entrance into baptism, which he mentions subsequently, symbolizes death (see Rom 6:3-4; Luke 12:50).

The road, in other words, will not be easy. The true follower of Christ will face suffering and persecution. S/he may even be executed. But the hardest death will be the death of what drives so many of us: selfish ambition, the thirst for recognition, and the desire of gain. You must let go of these things, he says to the twelve, and live for others. "Whoever wishes to become great among you must become your servant," effectively establishing what the kingdom should look like when it appears in history.

Kingdom Equals Cosmos

Here we have two traditions calling us to do the same thing. Live for others. If you wish to be closer to God according to Luria, imitate God who, in the creation of the cosmos, has revealed Himself to be a giver. Be present to

those experiencing loss, bereavement, and hardship, and you will help God bring about the creation He intended.

Mending God's creation finds expression in our tradition too. We are the hands of God, says the ELCA, called to do God's work. Our world seems to be falling apart. God needs help putting it back together. Thankfully, he hasn't left us to do it on our own. Jesus orients us to work for the kingdom he inaugurated here on earth by following him through service to others.

This week I invite each of you to find *one way* you can serve others, whether it be through the giving of your time, your talent, or your treasure. Make the world a better place. Help God mend this broken cosmos. Help God bring about the kingdom.

Our Mission

You all know the beginning. Read by the dashing James T. Kirk of the Starship Enterprise, its five-year mission was simple: "to seek out new life and new civilizations; to explore strange, new worlds; to boldly go where no man has gone before."

As people of faith, we have more than a five-year mission. We have a *life-long mission*, namely, to imitate God in our giving or Christ in our living – to seek out the welfare of our neighbor; to work with God in mending the world and ushering in His kingdom; to boldly serve others as Christ has done before!

Amen.