

Jesus Christ the Extra-Terrestrial

Colossians 1.15-20

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First Christian Church

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He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Note: Scene selections from YouTube or DVD are in italics.

Jesus Christ was *not* from around here. Jesus Christ *was* from around here. F. Scott Fitzgerald said,

The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.

Christians have been holding those two opposed ideas in mind for two thousand years. Jesus was from around here, and he was not from around here. He was like us, and he was not like us. We believe that Jesus Christ was fully divine. We believe that Jesus Christ was fully human. We confess that he is the Son of God. We declare that he was the child of Mary.

The Gospel of John begins like this:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light

shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it...and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

Last week's scripture from Philippians said much the same thing of Jesus Christ:

...though he was in the form of God,
(he) did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Today's scripture says much the same thing: everything was created through him. In him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. He died on a cross for us.

The 1700 year old Nicene Creed, still spoken on occasion in most of the world's churches, says this,

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven. By the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate in the Virgin Mary and was made man.

We call this particular extraordinary belief "the Incarnation." The One we know as Jesus Christ was God's instrument at Creation. He existed before he was conceived in Mary's womb. But the most astonishing thing in that creed is the bold declaration that "For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven." Why would he do that? It is a great mystery, perhaps the greatest mystery of all: the

astonishing, incomprehensible love of the Creator for Creation, of the divine for the human.

Our movie this week is “E.T. the Extraterrestrial.” It’s a lovely movie by Stephen Spielberg. Its premise is that a friendly little being from another planet who was visiting earth to check out the flora—the plants—was accidentally left behind. He is discovered and befriended by a young boy named Elliot, who calls him “E.T.”, which is short for “extra-terrestrial”—someone not from our planet. Later, Elliot’s older brother and sister befriend E.T. as well. Elliot and his brother and sister are being raised by their mother because their father had run off to Mexico with another woman. Elliott, in many ways, feels abandoned—the same way that E.T., left behind on earth, feels abandoned. He develops an astonishing symbiotic relationship with Elliott. Though they are very different, they feel each other’s feelings. Here is a scene about what happens when E.T. sees Elliott cut and bleeding:

***“ET: OUCH” on You Tube
On DVD, Scene 11, “The Magic Touch”***

In most movie and film treatments of beings from another planet, the aliens are very hostile and overwhelmingly powerful: think “War of the Worlds” and “Independence Day” and “Alien.” And there’s a reason for that, why the arrival of an alien could be a thing to fear. The native peoples of North and South America, who had thrived for tens of thousands of years, were nearly obliterated when Europeans arrived on these shores. According to the best estimates, within two hundred years of that arrival, the native populations of the Americas had been reduced by around 90%, some by conquest, but mostly by diseases for which they had no natural immunity. The Voyager Spacecrafts, which were launched in 1977,

had charts showing where earth was in relationship to our solar system and golden records which Carl Sagan had devised. According to the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Dr. Sagan and his associates assembled 115 images and a variety of natural sounds, such as those made by surf, wind and thunder, birds, whales, and other animals. To this they added musical selections from different cultures and eras, and spoken greetings from Earth-people in fifty-five languages, and printed messages from President Carter and U.N. Secretary General Waldheim.

The Voyagers are still out there, in deep space. They've long since moved beyond our solar system. Steven Hawking, who is probably the smartest human being since Einstein, said sending out that information on those spacecraft was the single most reckless thing human beings have ever done. He said we should keep a low profile and fervently hope that no alien life ever found us—because if they did find us, they would be vastly superior to us technologically and have no instinctual sympathy for our existence. Hawking thought that if alien life forms “discovered” us, they would pillage the earth and then decide later whether they wanted to colonize it or just move on.

E.T. is not a rampaging alien. While he is advanced in many ways, he is also hunted, and afraid, and desperately longing to go home. His only hope of deliverance lies in the support and courage of young Elliott.

***“E.T: FLYING ACROSS MOON” on YouTube
On DVD, Scene 13, “A Moonlight Ride”***

There are many religious motifs in ET. The touching fingers on our bulletin covers, taken from the movie poster, are based on an image from Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, when God reaches out to touch the finger of Adam. E.T. has the ability to heal wounds. He dies and comes back to life. But even though E.T. was intended by the screenwriter and director to be Christlike, he was not intended to be Christ himself. The theme of the movie is not so much how he saves others out of

love, but how *he* is saved by love. There is a great deal of compassionate love in this movie—between E.T. and Elliott, within Elliott’s family, even with a kind scientist who also wants E.T. to get back home. That love is not based on similarity. E.T. and Elliott are not only different species (E.T. looks like he evolved from a turtle), they’re also from different solar systems. The things they have in common are deep compassion, deep empathy, and deep love for the very different other. In this time of huge and terrible division in the world and in our country; with all the growing manifestations of hatred that are expressed in contempt for the other; it is well to recall the essential, true-to-life extraterrestrial of our scripture reading, who, for our sakes and our salvation, came down from heaven and died for us out of love. Love is not only a human quality. It is the essential nature of the God who made *us* and who made *them*—those very different others, wherever they may be.

The poet Alice Meynell wrote about that over a century ago. She envisioned many beings on many planets in need of salvation. To each of these alien beings God would send some manifestation of Godself, a deliverer made both in the image of God and in the image of the beings who occupied that planet. Here is that poem, *Christ in the Universe*:

WITH this ambiguous earth
His dealings have been told us. These abide:
The signal to a maid, the human birth,
The lesson, and the young Man crucified.
But not a star of all
The innumerable host of stars has heard
How He administered this terrestrial ball.
Our race have kept their Lord’s entrusted Word.
Of His earth-visiting feet
None knows the secret, cherished, perilous,
The terrible, shamefast, frightened, whispered, sweet,
Heart-shattering secret of His way with us.

No planet knows that this
Our wayside planet, carrying land and wave,
Love and life multiplied, and pain and bliss,
Bears, as chief treasure, one forsaken grave.
Nor, in our little day,
May His devices with the heavens be guessed,
His pilgrimage to thread the Milky Way
Or His bestowals there be manifest.
But in the eternities,
Doubtless we shall compare together, hear
A million alien Gospels, in what guise
He trod the Pleiades, the Lyre, the Bear.
O, be prepared, my soul!
To read the inconceivable, to scan
The myriad forms of God those stars unroll
When, in our turn, we show to them a Man.

Of all the grievous issues that beset our world at this present time, the one that hit home most personally was what happened yesterday in Charlottesville, Virginia. Charlottesville is my late father's hometown. His father, Frank, of German descent—*Hartman* used to have two "n's" at the end—was an architect and an engineer. He served as the Director of Buildings and Grounds at the University of Virginia, a beautiful campus founded by Thomas Jefferson and designed to illumine the qualities of freedom, reason, and learning. On the gate to the University from the corner is a quotation from one of Jefferson's letters:

...here we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it.



This is my grandfather, standing in front of the Rotunda at the University of Virginia. My grandfather supervised the construction of the beautiful Alderman Library during the Great Depression and, with his brother, built a very fine apartment complex, brick colonial, on tree-shrouded Rugby Road, across the street from Fraternity Row, where he lived with my grandmother. My grandfather must have been proud of his German heritage. My grandmother tried to tell me about the music playing on his old Victrola—Bach and Beethoven—and I remember a book on his shelf from an author I thought was pronounced “Go Thee,” which my grandmother told me was Goethe. I vaguely remember a lithograph of a fat man who wore a strange hat named “Luther”—Martin Luther. And I seem to remember my grandfather trying to tell someone—perhaps one of my older, smarter cousins, though I’m not sure—what $E=Mc^2$ meant. I didn’t understand a word of it, though I was led to understand that Einstein was German, too. Great musicians, great authors, the founder of the Protestant Reformation, the most brilliant scientist ever. But though he honored his German heritage, he was always an American first. My father was one of his five sons. When the United States entered World War II, all served, four of them overseas. My father was in Asia. Three of his brothers were sent to Europe. Two of them—my father’s twin brother, Billy, and his oldest brother, Frank, Jr.—were both gravely wounded in the Battle of the Bulge. His youngest brother, 19 year old Richard, was killed in the Battle of Hurtgen Forest on Thanksgiving Day, 1944. They fought against was a vicious racist ideology—manifest both in German Naziism and Japanese militarism—that said some human beings were, by virtue of their race, supreme to other human beings, and thereby worthy to rule over them. My grandfather of German lineage hated—oh, my

grandfather hated—Hitler and all of his works. If not for Hitler, his youngest boy would still be alive. If not for Hitler, two of his boys would not have come home with scars and memories that left them screaming out in the middle of the night. If not for Hitler, his sons would not have gone to war in the homeland of their forebears. If not for Hitler and the Nazis, Germany would not have been reduced to a smoldering ruin. If not for Hitler and the Nazis, millions of innocents would not have been exterminated. If not for Hitler and the Nazis, that cancer on the German people and name... “*Hush*,” my grandmother said to him. “Your grandson is listening.”

And so, when I saw yesterday the image of young millennials giving Nazi salutes in Charlottesville, Virginia, the home of my father and grandfather and grandmother, I thought of them. I also thought, dear God, have those poor children forgotten, or did they simply never know? Do they no longer teach history? Or is it that we can learn all we want to know from the internet, and we can read only what we want to read, and we can listen to only whom we want to listen to, and we can grow more and more eccentric because we encounter fewer and fewer people who will disagree with us?

I’m not saying one side in yesterday’s conflict was totally wrong (though the white supremacists, the Klansmen and Neo-Nazis *were* totally wrong) and the other side totally right. Huey Long, the Governor of Louisiana and a classic American demagogue, was asked in the ’30’s if fascism could ever come to America. “Sure,” he said, “but here it will be called anti-fascism.” There is plenty of fascism on display in America, and some of it calls itself anti-fascist. It’s manifest whenever competing opinions are shouted down. It’s manifest in cowardly trolls who prefer to lurk in the darkness of anonymity. It’s manifest in race-baiting, and cop-hating, in radical nationalism and contempt for the First Amendment. It reveals itself in fear

and loathing of the other. It never turns its perpetually critical gaze upon itself. And if it doesn't believe in loving your neighbor as yourself, well why should it, when the guy who said we should do that was only a dusky Jew?

That dusky Jew—my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ—came down for us and for our salvation. Why? Because, in him, the divine love embraced something other than itself—it embraced all of us in all of our fallen humanity.

Last clip from our movie:

***“E.T: I’LL BE RIGHT THERE” on YouTube
On DVD, Scene 19, “I’ll be Right Here.”***

So ET ascended to his home. Jesus Christ ascended into heaven. But Jesus Christ didn't leave us. He's there, and he's here. You can always find him, if you just remember where to look.

Here (*Touch heart*).

Here (*Touch head*).

Here (*Lift up Bible*).

There (*Point to congregation*).

Amen.