EXISTENTIAL THEOLOGY: The Holy/Fleeting Nature of Planet Earth…and Us"

Rev. Scott W. Alexander, Preaching

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Unitarian Church North

This morning, my dear friends, I am going to deliver a sermon that has been a long time in coming. It's been a long time in coming for two important (and, I now realize, intertwined and inter-connected) reasons:

1) First, for many months now I have been thinking regularly and intensely about what I shall call my emerging ***"Existential Theology"*** – a decidedly blunt and no-nonsense spiritual way of looking at the ultimate future of my own individual human life, and the life of our planet – and I have struggled with precisely how

express this coherently and well to you (for your own theological and philosophical consideration) …

2) And secondly, despite my intellectual and spiritual passion about this, I have been hesitant to give my emerging theological perspective public voice because (despite the care and caution I always bring to sermon preparation) I have been concerned that some of you might be spiritually troubled (or at least somewhat disquieted, confused, or "down-heartened") by my well-meaning (AND SINCERE) personal conclusions about the ultimate reality and meaning of our lives on this earth. Whenever they are called to serve a congregation, Unitarian Universalist ministers promise to always ***"speak the truth in love"*** when they step into the pulpit…and I have worried about precisely how to do this with what is on my heart and mind this morning.

But, my natural fretting aside, the time has finally come for me to offer an existentialist theology – not asd some sort of ***"Final Truth from on High"*** but rather just ***"An emerging/personal perspective for your intellectual and spiritual consideration."***

[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREEN]

THIS MORNING I OFFER "A PERSONAL EXISTENTIAL THEOLOGY" FOR YOUR INTRELLECTUAL AND SPIRITUAL CONSIDERATION

So I invite you now to join me in reflecting on these spiritually weighty matters…and I hope that over the coming DAYS some of you will engage me in further conversation and reflection about what I have to say this morning…and how it interconnects (or doesn't interconnect) with your own thinking. Again, please remember, that whenever a Unitarian Universalist minister steps into the pulpit, it is always to begin a two-way conversation, never to

simply deliver a sure and solitary edict, pronouncing (from on high) the unquestionable truth!

So, with all that said, now that I've got you possibly nervous with all my caveats, let me begin!

[PAUSE…]

In this Spring of the year 2026 -- as I find myself living my 77th year on this planet – two stark and powerful existential realities stare me in the face as a creature of this earth:

[THE TWO EXISTENTIAL REALITIES ARE PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

1) **My personal life on this planet** (my physicians will tell you…and my aging body regularly reminds me) will surely end, sometime in the next decade or two, possibly much sooner…and…

2)**The life of this planet earth**, (any astrophysicist will tell you) will also surely end, sometime in the next 7 billion years.

Now, I grant you there is (as I stand before you this morning) **a tremendous amount of uncertainty** in the timing of **BOTH** these endings.

- **My doctors and I** (perhaps mercifully) do not know precisely how or when my life will end, and
- **The astrophysicists (and astronomers)** do not know precisely when our earth will similarly cease to exist…

But we do know for certain (for certain!...FOR CERTAIN!) that both **Scott Alexander** and **Our Planet Earth** will come to an eventual physical end. Mysterious timelines aside, the existential and scientific truth (as I understand it) is that my life, **AND** the life of this planet, are both finite/cosmic entities…and there is absolutely nothing anyone or

anything can do (technologically or otherwise) to prevent these ultimate outcomes.

[PAUSE…]

Let's start with what is arguably the easier of these "two demises" [***fatalities***] to wrap our heads around, the absolute fact of ***my*** (and, I might add, ***your***!) personal mortality as a physical creatures on this earth. Everyone knows (from Ben Franklin) that the only true inevitabilities in life are ***"death and taxes!"*** Although the human lifespan is being somewhat stretched out (in our time) by a whole array of amazing medical and scientific advances (advances that will undoubtedly continue to be made to extend human longevity)… the fact is that our human bodies (like the bodies of all the myriad living organisms on this planet) will eventually surrender to the vicissitudes of aging, and die.

As I shared a few months back from this pulpit

[PICTURE AND QUOTE OF REV. DR. FORREST CHURCH GOES UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]



The Rev. Dr. Forrest Church (1948-2009)

"Religion is about the twin mysteries of finding you rself alive, and realizing you have to die. To be at

home with life, we must make our peace with death."

I shared that my late colleague the Rev. Dr. Forrest Church built his reputation as a theologian on the blunt proposition that it is this stark existential reality of personal death that frames in all the work of religion and faith. **He suggested (in his many books) that It is the irrefutable human knowledge that we each must someday give up the gift of life that obliges us to all do the crucial spiritual work of finding whatever purposes and meanings we can for our days upon this earth…and he concludes that the only thing that answers (and outlives death) is LOVE – the human love we can freely give and receive during our miraculous lifespans….but more on that "great and saving truth" some other day.**

Now…I probably needn't point out that all around us here in southeastern Wisconsin, there are countless/erstwhile religious congregations whose

central spiritual assertion, hope and promise is that we human beings indeed need not ultimately die, and that through faith and belief (and perhaps, in some of these faith traditions, also "good works") we can achieve "eternal life," which (for most of these faith traditions) is some sort of spiritual awareness of self (and some sort of continued personal consciousness) that will see us into the next realm.

Now…while I am not now (nor have never been) in the business of criticizing the cherished religious beliefs of others…I can and will equivocally state (in this Unitarian Universalist venue) that (for me at least…as I have more-than-once expressed from this pulpit) the grand idea and promise of eternal life (which is so prominent in so many American religions, especially conservative Christian ones) makes **absolutely no spiritual, intellectual or existential sense to me personally**. As someone who thinks of himself as a keen and unsentimental

observer of the way life actually is on this planet, I see absolutely no evidence – not a shred or a whisper – that any such eternal awareness or continued "self-hood" beyond the grave is to be mine. To me (and I stress again, I am speaking only for myself, without arrogance or disrespect for the beliefs of others) to me the promise of eternal life (of any sort of "soulful/personal presence" beyond the grave) is utterly fantastic…utterly unbelievable…to me it just seems like just so much wishful thinking…a way to avoid spiritually facing the existential finality of death that Rev. Church urged us to existentially face full-on.

And so, personally (in my own, private spiritual and religious life) I believe that my destiny (that is to say "whatever purpose and joy and meaning my life is to have") must be spun out now, right here, in these fleeting and wondrous and limited years I have to walk upon the earth -- by the choices I make as a free and responsible (and caring) human being (I

talked more about this last week in my easter sermon on "Human Agency"…the fact that as long as we have breath, we are free to live and act and choose a meaningful life. And this conviction [view] (that my human destiny must and will be entirely played out during my earthly lifetime) makes me – philosophically speaking -- a nearly pure **EXISTENTIALIST**.

[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREEN]

SPIRITUALY, I AM AN UNASHAMED (AND UNAFRAID) EXISTENTIALIST!

Now, you may recall (from your old school days) that **"Existentialism"** is the term that was applied to the work of a rather diverse number of 19th and 20th century philosophers who all placed **the human individual (and human decision-making)** at the center of the universe. One on-line dictionary I

consulted offers these two similar definitions of Existentialism, side by side:

[THE TWO DEFINITION OF EXISTENTIALISM ARE PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS…ONE AT A TIME…SCOTT READS THEM OUTLOUD]

SLIDE 1:

Existentialism: A philosophy that emphasizes the uniqueness and isolation of <u>the individual experience</u> in a hostile or indifferent universe, regards human existence as unexplainable, and stresses freedom of choice and responsibility or the consequences of one's acts.

And

SLIDE 2:

"Existentialism: a modern philosophical movement stressing the importance of personal experience and responsibility and the demands that they

make on the individual, who is seen as a free agent in a deterministic and seemingly meaningless universe."

And so my personal faith as a Unitarian Universalist (which is fiercely and totally anchored in this earthly life) is **a purely existentialist faith**. Based on my direct experience with the (unavoidable and obvious) **MORTALITY** of my world ("This too shall perish") I insistently believe myself to be **a mortal creature**, in **an indifferent (if often amazing beautiful and glorious!) creation**, who is singularly and systematically responsible (through the choices I make during my limited lifetime) to **live a meaningful, purposeful, satisfying, loving and responsible life**.

[And let me pause here, if I might, to offer a brief-but-to-me-important "theological sidebar." Even though I regard myself an existentialist -- who sees myself as entirely responsible for the meaning of my life -- I also regard myself a theist…which is to

say I have a personal (and energizing and transformative) relationship with something larger than myself I call God. Even though I believe this physical creation (this world) is ultimately indifferent to my presence, I nonetheless feel a holy, reliable presence of beauty, goodness and love – infused in both natural and human things…a holy reliable presence which regularly blesses me and gives me great hope and joy….and I will further (on other theological occasions) talk about this ***"reliable holiness"*** that I see infusing and informing my creation…which I believe can co-exist (in my heart) with my fiercely "Existentialist" view. But that's for another day…let's now get back to my overriding ***"EXISTENTIALIST"*** worldview.]

To many people of faith, this no-nonsense existentialist perspective of mine might seem sad or despairing…but to my heart, it is anything but sad or despairing. The fact that I believe my lifetime is **absolutely limited** does not make my life

meaningless or without purpose and joy…and I will address that affirmative perspective at the very end of the sermon…but for now please know that my intellectual and spiritual embrace of the fact of my own mortality is actually **a great source of hope and meaning and joy for me.** The very reality of my personal mortality (that I've got **only-so-much-time and space** to spin out my purpose and soul as a human being) paradoxically infuses my life with great hope and meaning. I once again share my colleague Dennis Daniel's famous existentialist quote about our human destiny: "I have spent a lifetime trying to get Unitarian Universalism down to just 3 words, and I've finally done it, ***"THIS IS IT!"***

[PAUSE…]

And thus – after fully facing my own personal mortality (again, without despair or self-pity…and indeed with – AS I HAVE SAID -- a great deal of urgency and joy) -- I move on to spiritually face **the SECOND stark and powerful existential reality** that

stares me in the face as a creature of earth…That being the certainty (the astrophysicists ***unanimously*** tell us) that one day the world as we know it (our precious planet earth suspended in this seemingly endless universe of ours) will also come to an end.

Now…if you Google ***"The End of Planet Earth"*** what pops up is a variety of "doomsday scenarios" that do not make for particularly cheerful reading. ***Wikipedia***, the amazing and helpful on-line encyclopedia has fully 19 pages devoted to a sobering variety of ways our earth could be destroyed -- or all life on earth ended. They report first – for example -- that there is a one-in-a-million chance that an **asteroid** of sufficiently destructive size (never mind that puny house-size asteroid that recently shook Russia!) a massive asteroid will strike (and destroy) our planet in the next century, and that same statistical risk will continue unabated thereafter. Another on-line source, ***The Discovery Company***, reports that a ***"rogue star"*** (which

astronomers have already named ***Gliese 710***) ***[GLI-ESE]*** could "barrel into our corner of the galaxy" in roughly 1.5 million years, shredding the ***Oort Cloud*** of countless, huge comets that would strike and destroy the earth. Similarly, concerned astronomers tell us, if any number of stars (near to our solar system) were to burn out, the resulting **hypernova** would blast the earth with enough gamma radiation to destroy the ozone layer, exposing all life forms to a deadly dose of solar radiation. As if all this cosmic isn't scary enough, there is a one in 50,000 chance each year that a **"super volcanic eruption"** (like the cataclysmic Toba Eruption -- which occurred in Indonesia 74,000 years ago and almost caused the extinction of the human race) could end most-or-all life forms on the planet.

Now, admittedly, in each of these cases, the statistical odds (of humanity and earth dodging

these cosmic catastrophes, or any of the other terrifying doomsday possibilities scientists spell out) are pretty good. But then (on page 10 of their detailed analysis) ***Wikipedia*** names the ultimate astronomical reality upon which leading astrophysicists have long agreed, the scientific certainty that in about 5 billion years, the evolution of the universe (for they have long understood that our universe is constantly and inexorably unfolding!) the evolution of the universe will mean that (and now I quote them)

"Our sun will [eventually] exhaust its hydrogen core and become a red giant [a dying star], becoming thousands of times more luminous and losing roughly 30% of its current mass…[as a consequence] Earth's orbit will decay due to the effects of tidal drag, causing it to enter the Sun's expanding atmosphere and be destroyed in 7.6 billion years.

[PICTURE OF EARTH BURNING UP IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]



Before being swallowed by the sun, the earth's oceans would evaporate, and the earth would finally be destroyed"…captured and vaporized by the sun.

Now…let me be very clear about this. From everything I have read, it is clear that leading astronomers and astrophysicists are still debating <u>some of the details</u> of precisely **how** and **when** our planet will **cosmically come to an end**, but <u>none</u> of them – not a <u>one</u> -- doubt that earth is ultimately doomed, and will someday cease to exist in the vast universe. Like all living organisms on earth, our

universe is constantly changing and evolving, and no place in the universe (including our home planet) is exempt from the indifferent effects of that evolution.

[PAUSE…]

But...dear friends… the really good news here is that (barring the effects of an unlikely **KILLER ASTROID** or a **ROGUE STAR** or a **HYPERNOVA)** the likely timeline for the end of planet earth is a very, very long way off (countless generations from now…way beyond your or my puny lifetimes here in the 21st Century!)…

[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREEN]

Our earth's ultimate demise is most likely 5 billion years away… That's 1,000,000 X 5000 years off!...or (if your prefer) 1,428,571 human generations away!

at least 5 billion years…which is a million years, times five thousand (1,000,000 X 5,000)….wrap your heads around that…a million years…times five thousand. So, if a human generation comes along every 25 years (which is the way we human beings traditionally calculate our generations) the end of the world won't come for 1,428,571 generations ***[one-million, four-hundred –and-twenty-eight-thousand-and-five-hundred-and-one generations]***.

That's a whole lot of descendants from now, folks, assuming (of course) we homo sapiens don't stupidly manage to kill ourselves off with nuclear weapons or global warming or some other preventable nonsense that we seem so susceptible to! (But more on the stupidity of humanity's manifold folly – like endless wars -- some other Sunday!)

So…AGAIN…it's **an astrophysical certainty** that ultimately – and again, hopefully way down the

human road – it is an **astrophysical certainty** that our world will come to an end.

[PAUSE…]

So…why am I sharing all these uncomfortable scientific facts here [ON THIS BRIGHT AND BEAUTIFUL _____ SPRING SUNDAY?]…what is my theological or spiritual point? Why dwell on this hard cosmic truth of our world's eventual and inevitable demise at all, if it is so very far off?...and such a distant (and largely irrelevant) truth to us here-and-now?

Well, for this reason, and this reason alone**. Just as it is important (as Forrest Church said) for every human being to face his or her own personal mortality, I think it is theologically and spiritually crucial for humanity (as a whole) to fully face the stark and truly EXISTENTIAL nature of its predicament on this mortal planet.**

[THE PICTURE AND CAPTION OF THE BURNING EARTH IS PROJECTED BACK UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS…AND REV. ALEXANDER POINTS TO IT]



THE END OF EARTH AND ALL LIFE ON IT

Confronting <u>this fate</u> is not an easy or natural thing for us as a species. I think that most human persons (who find themselves alive on this rich and marvelous planet) and most faith traditions (offering their various expressions hope and meaning for humanity) tend to think of the world (and now I'm going to use an everyday household metaphor here) most of us like think of the world as **a FIXED AND ELEGANTLY SET DINNER TABLE**

[THE FOLLOWING IMAGE IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREEN]



THIS WORLD IS "A FIXED AND ELEGANTLY SET DINNER TABLE" FOR US TO ETERNALLY ENJOY!

which God (or some other mysterious/gracious hand or force) set before us eons ago in (in mystery and blessing) <u>for all time</u>. Day to day, year in and year out, the life we experience here on earth (which, despite its very real hardships is routinely so delicious and satisfying) seems like such a FIXED AND RELIABLE PRESENCE. We tend to think of earthly life (as we experience it through our ears and eyes and nose and fingertips) as an **ETERNAL/HOLY TABLEAU**…as a gift given forever.

But the astrophysicists are quietly-but-insistently telling the human family that **ultimately this is not so!** The miracle of life on earth – which is (mercifully and in all likelihood) secure of millions of years to come – **is nonetheless not secure forever. And because it is not forever – AND HERE IS MY BIG SPIRITUAL INSIGHT FOR THE MORNING FOLKS -- because it is not eternal, we human beings must embrace life on this planet as A HOLY/FLEETING EXISTENTIAL GIFT…A HOLY/FLEETING EXISTENTIAL GIFT WE MUST TREASURE, SERVE, HONOR, AND PROTECT.**

THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

"WE MUST TREASURE, SERVE, HONOR AND PROTECT THE HOLY EXISTENTIAL GIFT OF BEING HERE ON EARTH"

And this brings me, full theological circle, to where I think I was at the beginning of this sermon.

Because:

1) As one individual person in my late 70's I am fully aware of **the absolute nature of my own personal mortality**…and…
2) Because (as the whole of the human family) we are (unless we are fiercely denying the science) fully aware of **our species' and our planet's eventual cosmic mortality**…

[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREEN…SCOTT READS IT OUTLOUD]

Collectively and individually we finite human beings have the moral and spiritual (and existential!) duty to live as fully and responsibly and joyfully and well as we possibly can.

The fact that all of life on earth (both personal and global) is finite -- and has very **real and poignant and absolute limits** – does not call us (as some

might imagine) to despondency, selfishness, greed and despair **("What's the point, I'm going to die anyway?"**) but rather calls us (every day!) to embrace and use THE HOLY EXISTENTIAL GIFT OF BEING to its fullest and finest potential.

Let me say this another way. Because nothing in any sphere of life is forever, there is a **HOLY URGENCY** for us…

[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UPON THE CHANCEL SCREEN AS SCOTT READS IT]

There is a "HOLY URGENCY" for us (individually and collectively) to evermore shape our earthly lives along the pathways of decency, compassion, justice, reason, service and love.

Personally -- as a very-bald, and decidedly-aging, white male example of my species -- I hope I have a few more years yet to **"get it right"** (or at least **"approximately" right**!) in my own life. And globally, despite all the many pressing challenges we

face as a species, I still hope humanity as a whole has many more millions of years yet to also strive to get its **Collective Act Together**. The meaning and purpose of life (for both individuals and humanity as a whole) lies in the existential duty **to do the best we can** – to choose compassion over indifference…justice over cruelty injustice…Peace over war…generosity over greed…wisdom over ignorance…and love over hate…ALWAYS LOVE OVER HATE.

[PAUSE…]

And so – in both these spheres of human existence ***[SCOTT HOLDS BOTH HANDS UP IN FRONT OF HIMSELF]*** (the personal and the universal) – this Unitarian Universalist ***[SCOTT POINTS TO HIMSELF]*** does not spiritually require (thank you very much) any grand, eternal promise from God or anything else. I do not and will not spiritually demand (what I have rationally concluded) this mortal creation of

mine is not capable of giving me…that being ETERNALITY.

[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREEN]

IN THIS CREATION, ETERNALITY IS NOT AN OPTION

And I will not, I assure you, I will not spiritually begrudge or bemoan the preciously fleeting existential nature of my own life, nor the inexorable evolution of all of creation, wherever it takes earth and us.

[PAUSE…]

Now…let me close by acknowledging that I fully understand how this **EXISTENTIAL THEOLOGY** of mine (this spiritual view that the universe is indifferent and that nothing in life is eternal, and that that's OK because we are free and responsible to live as fully and finely for as long as we have the gift) may not be **spiritually satisfying, adequate or right** for some of you. I hope in the days and

months ahead to hear from you about where <u>you</u> ultimately find meaning, hope and purpose for your lives – both as individuals and as a part of the human collective. But for me, I find <u>spiritual fulfilment and abundance</u> (and genuine theological satisfaction) in ***THE HOLY URGENCY*** of this fleeting, uncertain, temporal gift CALLED LIFE. What I have on this earth (what we have together on this amazing planet) – in all its fragility, frenzy and flow – is **<u>holy enough</u>**…Dear God it is **<u>holy enough</u>**.

So let us – individually and together -- live this fleeting life of ours…and live it wisely, lovingly and well. Let us dance this **<u>sacred fleeting dance</u>** with full presence of life, soul and being…and let tomorrow take care of itself. That (for me) is HOLY PROMISE (AND TREASURE) ENOUGH.

AMEN.

BENEDICTION

The words of early 20th century humanist (and existentialist) minister John Dietrich:

We live in a great impersonal universe…and it matters tremendously how we conduct ourselves, for we are actually the makers of human destiny.

We are not simply individuals who have a beginning in life and an ending.

We are links in the endless chain of life.

To us has been committed all that life has won from the chaos in all the ages past.

Only through us can that trues from the past be transmitted to the future…

Our chief business, therefore, is to put beauty in place of ugliness…

Good in place of evil…

Laughter in place of tears…

To dispel error with knowledge…

hatred with love…

displace strife and contention with peace and cooperation.

Within us a voice which urgently calls us to these tasks,

This is the work of religion..