

“I know why the caged God sings”
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The year is 1894. The place is the University of Chicago. The speaker is the pre-eminent and Nobel Prize-winning physicist Albert Michelson. And he’s announcing that all the fundamental laws and facts of the physical world have been discovered. The universe is knowable.

It was supposed to be the culmination of the Scientific Revolution that had begun more than 300 years earlier, when a ragtag group of free-thinkers, astronomers, scientists, and mathematicians turned natural philosophy on its head, insisting that the world was governed by rules that could be discovered through experimental research. If the universe was a clock, all they had to do was figure out what made it tick.

Given enough time and the right equipment, we could know everything.

This search for understanding is what drives Peter also. He goes up on that mountain, sees Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah, and he thinks he has it all figured out. After all, Jesus has just, days earlier, singled him out as the rock of the church. Peter’s feeling pretty good about himself right now—minus an awkward incident when Jesus called him Satan. It was just a misunderstanding... One that Peter, ever the teacher’s pet, now hopes to correct. So he offers to build a booth, a tent, a dwelling.

His suggestion may seem silly—given the fact that Moses and Elijah are... dead. But many scholars believe this was exactly what Peter’s religion told him to do. When you are visited by angels, you offer hospitality.

Peter, like Michelson, speaks with confidence, because he believes that his worldview has supplied him with the right answers.

I admit I find that degree of confidence appealing. It’d be nice to have the answers. And of course, if I’m being honest, I’ve already drawn conclusions about what is true and what is not. Maybe you have too. Maybe right now, you’re really hoping that I’m not asking you to buy into the whole story of this glow-in-the-dark Jesus who encounters two dead guys and summons a voice from a cloud. After all, you know how the world works, and that kind of stuff just doesn’t happen.

Only, Michelson was wrong. He wasn’t standing at the end of the age of discovery; he was on the cusp of something that was about to upend the world as he knew it. I’m talking about quantum physics. Now, I am no expert. But I know enough to say that quantum physics is the study of very, very little things. And as scientists began to observe the atomic and subatomic strata of the universe, they noticed that these very little things weren’t behaving the way they should.

Take light for example. Logic said that light must be either a particle or a wave, not both. And yet, light was exhibiting the behavior of both. Sometimes it acted like a stream of particles; other times, it appeared more like a wave. What was even weirder was that the act of observing this phenomenon appeared to change the results. Light didn't become a particle or a wave until it was observed; prior to that, it existed in a third state of potential. This meant that one of the essential assumptions of classical physics was potentially wrong—the material world is not in fact an independent, objective reality. It is dynamic and interactive. It changes based on how we perceive it.

And how we perceive it is limited, said Werner Heisenberg. His uncertainty principle states that you can't, with any precision, determine both the location and the momentum of a particle at the same time. In other words, there is a fundamental limitation to our knowledge. It doesn't matter how precise the tool. This is something you will never know.

Moreover, these particles, on a quantum level, are potentially entangled. What happens here can influence what happens over there, despite no contact and all this space between, because at a totally invisible level, particles here and over there are potentially connected.

The laws of classical physics said this shouldn't be possible. If true, the universe isn't a clock; it's an Escher painting.

This theory was so disturbing to Albert Einstein that he flatly rejected the idea of uncertainty, saying, "God does not play dice." Niels Bohr famously responded, "Einstein, stop telling God what to do."

The exact implications of these discoveries are hotly debated within the scientific community and still largely unknown. I have no doubt that what we think we know based on quantum physics will change. And that's exactly the point.

If quantum physics has done anything, it has instilled humanity with fresh humility before the mysteries of the universe.

A humility Peter receives quite quickly in our passage today. While Peter is mid-sentence, confidently espousing his solution, a voice from heaven interrupts him and says, "Hey! You! Listen up!"

Peter realizes that he got it wrong. There weren't three people on that mountain; there was only one—Christ. The vision of Moses and Elijah is just there to help Peter understand who Jesus is. He's a lawgiver like Moses and a prophet like Elijah. What's happening on that mountain isn't prose; it's poetry.

And what Christ wanted in that moment wasn't a tent to put over his head; it was a beholding of God's glory. Which got me thinking... we're a lot like Peter.

Maya Angelou once wrote, "The caged bird sings with a fearful trill, of things unknown, but longed for still, and his tune is heard on the distant hill, for the caged bird sings of freedom."

Angelou of course is talking about the ways in which we as a society limit people through our racialized and gendered expectations. But I wonder if the reason God speaks out that day on the mountain is because God too has been caged. Caged by all the people who, like Peter and Michelson, think they've got God all figured out. People, who upon any divine encounter, immediately try to build walls around it and construct a dwelling for God. People who, instead of standing in awe, or singing Hallelujah, or asking for a teaching, set out to control and define the mystery. Small, safe people who come up with small, safe ideas about who God is and is not, what God wants and does not, who God loves and does not.

The Transfiguration is, therefore, an interruption—a confrontation between our ideas about God and the unknowable majesty of divinity.

In other words, just as quantum physics had to remove some of our assumptions about the universe, the Transfiguration had to remove some of Peter's and our assumptions about God.

To experience God, we have to let go of our ideas about God.

I'm not saying that we should simply abandon all theological and intellectual inquiry. Absolutely not. Continue to explore, think, and look. What I'm saying is don't ever think that you've arrived at an answer. Be open to the ongoing revelation. Do exactly what that heavenly voice asks of Peter: "Listen."

Because, in the end, what God wants most is not for you to understand. It's for you to live free.

And that, my friends, is what brings us closer to the true miracle. The Transfiguration of Jesus is not the greatest miracle in this passage. The miracle is what happens next.

It's when the disciples are on their knees, cowering in the dust, and Jesus walks over to them, to his friends, and places his hand on them. The same hand that healed the sick. The same hand that raised the dead. And he says, "Rise, and do not be afraid." *Rise*, the same word, *egeiro* in Greek, that Jesus uses to describe his own resurrection. He's not just telling them to stand up; he's saying, "Be raised!" Be raised like Lazarus. Be raised like Jesus.

Jesus could have easily rebuked Peter. But instead, he touches his friend and tells him not to be afraid. Jesus will guide Peter through the cloud, down the mountain.

Jesus tells him not to be afraid, because Jesus understands that it wasn't just arrogance that led Peter to suggest constructing dwellings, just as it isn't just arrogance that leads us to decide we've figured out the truth. In the end, it's not pride that cages God; it's fear.

Sociologists have long observed that one's comfort with ambiguity and tolerance of uncertainty depend on one's feeling of personal safety. In other words, when your life feels chaotic, you want in your belief system the certainty that you're lacking in your personal life.

Jesus gets this. And so he does exactly what Peter needs—he makes him feel safe. He tells him that he's not alone.

Peter now knows why the caged God sings. The caged God sings of freedom. The caged God sings, because when that bird sings, its song transfigures the cage, transfigures us—not with a rebuke, but with an invitation.

And when the cage is gone, when all that we thought we knew about God and the universe vanishes, we are left with only what was inside. That, I cannot describe. But I can say that you are invited. **Amen.**