



From the Pulpit: June 30, 2024

Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time—IMPACT Cosa Rica Minute

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

John 1:1–4

God After... VI: God after Einstein

Georgetown’s Professor John Haught has written these books called *God After Darwin* and *God After Einstein*. This summer Katie, Christine, and I are preaching this sermon series about these revolutionary thinkers that have impacted Christian thinking about God. Today we’re thinking about Albert Einstein.

If I tell you an embarrassing story, do you promise not to tell anyone?

The other day Doogie and I were walking up Warwick Avenue to go to the Jewel. We run into a charming couple with their little dog, it was a beagle. This couple asks me what’s my dog’s name and I told them “this is Doogie”. Obligorily I say “what’s your dog’s name” and (this is a beagle) they say “my dog’s name is Darwin.”

I just spent 50 or 60 or 70 hours thinking about Charles Darwin and I have an education and I look this guy in the eye and ask “way do you call your beagle Darwin?”

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.

For the last 20 years of his life, Albert Einstein had the greatest job in the world. If you managed to nail a position at the Institute for Advanced

Study in Princeton, they gave you an office, a chair, a desk, a pencil, a chalkboard, a wastebasket, a typist, and absolutely no expectations. No students, no classes, no lectures, no publish or perish; all you had to do was sit in your room and think.

“All because he changed the world just by thinking about it.”



While at the Institute, Dr. Einstein lived at 112 Mercer St., about a block from the Princeton Seminary Library where I hung out all day every day for three years. He died in 1955 so I missed him by about 30 years, but Einstein’s ghost haunts the streets of Princeton to this day, all kinds of myths and legends.

A 10-year-old girl lived next to Dr. Einstein, and when her math homework flummoxed her, she would knock on his front door and ask for help with long division. That’s convenient: living next door to the greatest physicist in the history of the world. He taught another neighborhood girl how to play the violin; their violin duets are legendary in Princeton.

He was irresistible. That shock of unruly white hair; he refused to wear socks, even in January; that ubiquitous pipe: he became kind of the village mascot, or a symbol of its uncommon erudition. The Smithsonian has one of Einstein’s pipes; it is the most requested artifact in the entire Smithsonian collection.

When Einstein toured the United States, he was always surrounded by adoring hordes. He was always signing autographs and posing for the paparazzi before the paparazzi was a thing; it was the greatest mob of groupies until Elvis and the Beatles came along later.

All because he changed the world just by thinking about it. When he was 16 years old, he asked himself, “What would a beam of light look like if I were running alongside it? Would it stand still? Could you see little bits and pieces and particles of light?”

Ten years later, he wrote down his answer as the theory of special relativity, which is simple to state but almost impossible to understand. Simple to state: *The speed of light is the same for all observers, regardless of their motion relative to the light source.*

No matter how fast you are traveling relative to a beam of light, the light beam still travels at 186,000 miles a second. If you’re running alongside the light at 90% of its speed, or away from it at the same speed, the light is still going at 186,000 miles a second.

But if this is true, of course, then space and time are not fixed and constant. Once we thought a mile was a mile and a minute was a minute was a minute, but now we know they’re not. If you and I are moving at vastly different speeds, we each have our own clocks, and they’re not the same. The faster you go, the slower your clock moves.

Stephen Hawking says that if you want to live longer all you have to do is get on an airplane and fly east for the rest of your life at 600 miles an hour. Then he goes on to say, of course, that the fraction of a second you will have gained will be more than offset by the fact that you have to eat airplane food for the rest of your life.¹ Space and time are not fixed and stiff, but elastic and mutable.

¹Stephen Hawking, “A Brief History of Relativity,” *Time*, December 31, 1999, p. 70.

Simple to state, impossible to understand. When the idea was still relatively new, they asked the great Cambridge astronomer Arthur Eddington if it was true that only three people in the world understood Einstein’s theory of relativity, and he thought about that for a minute and finally said, “I am trying to think who the third person is.”²

The theory of **general** relativity is equally simple to state, but equally mind-blowing. Einstein said that gravity is not “spooky action at a distance,” but the curvature of space in the presence of matter. The earth bends the surrounding space-time. It’s like dropping a bowling ball on a trampoline; it creates a divot or a depression in the fabric of space-time. Gravity is not this inscrutable attraction between two distant

objects. Like, why are Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce drawn to each other like magnets? That’s “spooky action at a distance.” That’s essentially the Newtonian theory of gravity. No more. As the American physicist John Wheeler put it, “Spacetime tells matter how to move, and matter tells spacetime how to bend.”

This was a lot for people to take. Till the end of his life, Stephen Hawking got three letters a week telling him that Einstein was wrong.³

You see what the problem is, right? In relativity, nothing was fixed and certain; it’s all relative, pardon the pun. A mile is not a mile is not a mile, and a minute is not a minute is not a minute. Relativity is squishy, like the Stay Puff Marshmallow Man in *Ghostbusters*; you poke it and it gives.

You know what the Nazis called the Theory of Relativity? They called it Jewish science. For the Nazis, that was the worst thing you could call anything: Jewish science.

²Frederic Golden, “Albert Einstein: Person of the Century,” *Time*, December 31, 1999, p. 64.

³Hawking, *op. cit.*

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The Nazis thought that when the Jews got rich and liberal and educated and moved to Europe, they left the Ten Commandments behind them. They didn't believe in anything solid, like the Fhrer. Jews would tell you **anything**.

Dr. Einstein was on a tour of the United States in 1933 when he learned that the Nazis had forbidden Jews from teaching at universities. He was on "Wanted" posters all over Germany; the caption read "Not yet hanged." The bounty on his head was \$5,000. Dr. Einstein stayed in the United States; he never returned to his native land. That's when he started helping neighbors with their long division in Princeton.

Among others who fled in 1933 were 14 Nobel laureates and 26 of the 60 professors of theoretical physics in the country, including Edward Teller, Hans Bethe, Niels Bohr, Enrico Fermi, and Leó Szilárd. Most of these guys were at Los Alamos, and all of them are in the film *Oppenheimer*. Nazism is not just barbaric; it is stupid; you will lose the war.

One last theological truth about *God After Einstein*, and then I'll quit. After Einstein, we had to alter our conception about what was fixed and what was flexed. As one scientist puts it, "There is but one absolute of unique significance, one truth that is independent of all other positions."⁴ The one fixed constant in the universe is the speed of light, and everything else is relative to it.

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That is extremely meaningful for those of us who believe in The Light of the World. "In the beginning was the Word," says St. John, "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...in him was life, and the life is the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

Christians have long known that Jesus is the one fixed and unchanging constant in a world where all else is flex and bend, the one absolute of unique significance, the one truth independent of all other frames of reference. Are you relative to the Light?

Did Albert Einstein believe in God? Not in any conventional way. He scoffed at the primitive god of the Hebrew Bible. On the other hand, he once said, "To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is something that our minds cannot grasp, whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly: this is religion. In this sense, and in this sense only, I am a devoutly religious man."⁵



That's how some people picture *God After Einstein*: Jewish science. The rest of us will learn truth where truth is to be found, and the truth will set us free.

⁴Arthur Zajonc, *Catching the Light: The Entwined History of Light and Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 262.

⁵Albert Einstein, "What I Believe," originally written in 1930 and recorded for the German League for Human Rights. Quoted by Walter Isaacson in *Einstein: His Life and Universe* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), p. 387.

—Prayers of the People—
The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

God beyond our understanding,
God knit within us,
We praise you for sun, moon, and stars.
Last night we watched evening stars awaken,
curve around space itself,
bend toward us, lighting the night.
Now morning dawns, and the staggering
weight of sunrise draws us into you.
For this, we give you praise:
For evening and morning.
For rest and renewal.
For your presence dawning
For the simplicity of a day.

In gratitude, we give our life over to you,
we flex and bend toward you,
even as you flex and bend toward us,
our deepest longings aglow.
For only you know our center of gravity,
where our heart is drawn and why.
You know what binds us to the earth:
you know whose hands hold ours,
what kind of embodied incarnational love
pulls us toward our true selves.
Give us the gift of someone to sit alongside,
someone with whom to behold this day.
Give us the gift of community, of love.

Hold our greatest worries and our small frustrations.
When the daily dramas of our life feel
as if they are bending the very fabric of the universe,
place your peace in our midst, give us a sense of awe
where we can behold the grandeur of life,
the simple beauty of the very thing right in front of us.

Give us summer days that stretch out before us
as if time is standing still
even as life moves at the speed of light
let our lives be suspended in the gift of this day.
Fill us with gratitude.
Fill us to the brim, overflowing.

For the seasons that feel raw, where emotion
and longing seem to rise up, stormy and restless.
Hear us. Grieve with us. Suffer alongside us.
Know us in a new way, so that we can hear you
whisper across the challenge and trouble.

Let your incarnational resurrection hope
guide the way. In Jesus Christ, you emptied yourself
you were drained of power, wealth and even life
for the sake of love, for the sake of those who are most
exploited, marginalized, discriminated against.
Hold our prayer for the poorest and most vulnerable,
those who are hungry, those who are excluded,
those who encounter violence and feel despair
those in our own neighborhoods, our own cities
those in countries that feel far off, but are now
near to our heart, Lord hear our prayer. Help us to
see that the world already contains within it
enough kindness, enough food, enough energy, creativity
and love to bring about an end to starvation, war
and persecution: let us be part of the vision for your kingdom
come, your will be done.

Through the grace of your sustenance, be with us Christ.
And hear us as we pray together the prayer Jesus teaches us:
Our Father.... Amen.

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KENILWORTH UNION CHURCH
211 Kenilworth Avenue, Kenilworth Illinois 60043
847-251-4272 | kuc.org
facebook.com/kenilworthunionchurch