

# “Here Comes the Sun”

Sunday, January 7, 2007

The Rev. Dr. W. Frederick Wooden



Fountain Street Church  
24 Fountain St., NE  
Grand Rapids, MI 49503  
[www.fountainstreet.org](http://www.fountainstreet.org)

Printed by  
THE EXTENSION SERVICE  
of  
FOUNTAIN STREET CHURCH

Single Copies..... \$1.00

Copyright © 2007 by Fountain Street Church

**To the reader:** This sermon was only part of a service of worship with many components working together, all of which were designed to be experienced in a community context. In our "free pulpit" tradition, its concepts are intended not as truths to receive, but as spurs to your own thought and faith.

# “Here Comes the Sun”

*This is an edited version of the text delivered January 7, 2007. It has been enlarged to include explanation and illustrations not written but spoken, and to clarify text that on second reading, third or fourth actually, was not good enough or clear enough.*

*I beg your pardon for amending the past, but nothing of material fact or personal integrity was compromised in so doing.*

## Confession

I just finished a biography of Augustine of Hippo, who second only to Paul of Tarsus, defined western Christianity. One need not be a formal Christian to benefit by studying him. Augustine wrote hundreds of tomes. But most know only one of them – The Confessions. Much of what we call spirituality we owe to this book, as it is the first time a person talks about having personal faith. But the idea of confession was not revolutionary even then. Christianity requires a confession of sin before making a profession of faith. The author of the biography notices that before The Confessions Augustine had written little and struggled with that. But once he wrote his Confessions he was a torrent. Before he could profess his faith, he needed to confess.

Several sermons I am preaching this winter are my profession of faith. They are not new sermons, and I have wondered if they could be published. But that has not happened. Why? Perhaps confession must precede profession. But I shall proceed differently. Each sermon will have both confession and profession. However, like the ancient saint, I shall not address the confession to you directly. Each shall be a letter to someone, a conversation held at a distance.

Augustine spoke to God in his Confessions, and let the reader eavesdrop. My confessor is the same, but in the form of a friend I know and trust. As any alcoholic in recovery knows, unless you tell a real person your mistakes, it does not count.

Nor shall I address the profession to you either, but to a young evangelical Christian who wrote me a deeply interesting letter nine months ago. I have been trying to write her since then, but have failed. Something held me back, and I suspect it was my incomplete agenda with my failings. So you will hear two letters each time - one to my confessor, another to my “professee.” Forgive me for leaving you out of it, but this is what the spirit seems to demand of me.

\*

To my beloved friend, whose heart receives me without pause:

I am in thought of the great poet Josef Brodsky as I write you today, particularly a passage from his book *Watermark*, his journal of Venice in winter. I read it because he was a neighbor in absolute fact. I saw him in the neighborhood and my wife taught his daughter. After he died, when we were traveling abroad, we made it a point to visit his grave. It is in Venice. We stood there, at the cemetery on the Isola San Michele, seeing the marker in Russian and

Italian, with its little stack of stones showing that others had stopped by. Anyway, when we came home I happened upon the little book, given to my wife by his little girl, and the passage of which I am thinking now stuck with me: "...had life been a solely human affair, one would be issued at birth with a term, or a sentence, stating precisely the duration of one's presence here: the way it is done in prison camps. That this does not happen suggests that the affair is not entirely human: that something we've got no idea or control of interferes."

I wonder about that. Is my life mine, something I am living or is it a role I am playing in some larger pageant like a cosmic Oberammergau? As I grow older I see more patterns, hear more leitmotifs, sense a circularity of things. Most everything new reminds me of something before. Is this all in my head or some actual recognition of the nature of things? Both ideas, that it is purely subjective and that it is actually the way of the world, comfort me and dismay me. But I cannot tell if either or both is true. So I'll leave off that question and get on with it.

First scene, first leitmotif. My earliest memory is very precise, almost to the date. I am sitting in the back seat of the family car. It is very wide and I am sitting in the middle. Being barely more than two, all I can see is tree tops and sky through the windows. My hands are on the cushion beside me, trying to stay upright as we go. My father is driving and we are on our way to the hospital to collect my mother and my new baby brother. He was born March 4, so it is probably the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup>.

We arrive at the Seventh Day Adventist hospital in Takoma Park, Maryland. Under a port cochere sort of thing they get in, mom in her dark winter woolen coat and the cream-colored hat on her almost-black hair. My brother is in her arms, wrapped against the cold. We drive away. I can hear them murmuring to each other, mom and dad and baby. I can see and hear them, but they do not see me. The three of them are up front. I am in back. Separate. I feel separate. This may be the first moment when I am only myself, with my own thoughts, and it is a lonely place.

I think that ever since I have been trying to get back in, find a way back to that perfection of parent and child. It was mine until this moment, and now it is gone. He has it and I do not. That I had to outgrow it was not clear to me then. Instead it seemed like exile, banishment, punishment.

Years later, soon after arriving at our new home in Baltimore, we are at a new shopping center. There is a clown and balloons and other festivities. Mother hands me brother – I am nine and he is seven – and says "you stay and enjoy while I go shopping." I try to protest my terror at being left alone in this new place, but she is gone. Little brother has no worries and leaps into the party. I am in a panic. Finding him and tugging him free, I insist on finding mother. With a determination than belies my fear, I track her down, going from store to store until I find her in Montgomery Ward. I may even have gone to the office and said I was lost, now that I think again. We found each other of course, to her consternation, having ruined her time on her own. I am ashamed, deeply ashamed that I lacked courage, that I was afraid. I feel better finding her, but am ashamed that I do. All I want is to be safe, and I feel ashamed for wanting it.

"Can any praise be worthy of God? How magnificent your strength! How inscrutable your wisdom." Augustine begins his book. "We are one of your creatures, and our instinct is to praise. The thought of you stirs us so deeply that we cannot be content unless we praise because you made us for yourself and our hearts cannot rest until they rest in you."

\* \* \* \* \*

## Profession

### My dear young and inquiring friend.

It has been many months since I wrote you last. Too many. I have lots of excuses, all of them bad. The truth is I was struggling to find a way to address your questions honestly and honorably. How can one hope without faith in something beyond this world? What comfort can we give or get if there is no promise of eternal life? I could have readily responded long ago except that I realized those answers would not move you. What made me wait this long was realizing that we had profoundly different assumptions about the world, and until I named them and explained them, nothing I said would be of any use. Only now, almost a year later, am I ready to begin. But where to begin?

You were quite young in 2001, a year dominated by the horrid attack of September 11. I lived in New York City then, quite close to the catastrophe and literally buried some of its victims. Other things happened that year, though, among them the death of George Harrison. I thought about him that next January, especially his happy song, "Here Comes the Sun." After so many gloomy months it was good to notice the sun literally coming back, telling us even this horror will not last forever.

People see lots of meaning in nature. You and others doubtless read in its regularity and dependability the evidence of a divine mind at work. Theologians call it the argument from design, that the universe is like a fine watch, something too intricate to be accidental. And when terrible things happen to us it is consoling to think that these events fit somehow into a grander plan and design, that however bad this or that event is – sickness or war or earthquake – the world itself is not coming undone.

"Everything happens for a reason," we often say. Others will be more specific and say "It's God's will." Such ideas are a great comfort, assuaging the sense of unknowing, and giving meaning to what is apparently random and terrible. Yet there is a problem. Doesn't this mean bad things also have a reason? Leaving aside for a moment the question of evil – something I shall consider some time later - let's ask the next question. Are we also pre-directed, all our actions and even our thoughts mapped out for us like characters in a novel or a movie?

We humans seem to be of two minds. When life is good we believe in free will because that means we really did win the race, we really did deserve that promotion, that we really are good. But when life deals out misery we scour the heavens for evidence it was all for a larger reason and that somehow it is out of our control.

This has been going on since Job sat in dust and ashes picking at his boils and listening to friends debate the nature of God. There's a lot of great poetry there, but the question comes down to this: Either an almighty God exists and is the author of everything, including evil, or humans have free will. If "everything happens for a reason," then God is the author of it, good and bad. We are off the hook but God is in a bad place. On the other hand, if we have free will we are responsible for our acts, but God is not almighty. And what sort of God would be less?

We want to have it both ways. And for the last two thousand years we have tried to do just that. I say it is time to consider that we can't have it both ways, that one or the other is more likely to be true, and we must figure that out and shape our thoughts accordingly; for who of us would willingly live a lie?

Free will is the first question because all other questions return to this. It is a fault line in theology, and the ground is unsteady when we try to straddle these diverging tectonic moral plates. Once we decide which one is more likely to be true, we will find ourselves on firmer

ground. What may surprise you is that this is not what divides liberal or conservative, believer or skeptic. Everyone wants it both ways. One can be an atheist determinist as much as a Calvinist, just ask a sociobiologist.

Let's start with the philosopher William James who faced just this struggle as a young man and had an intellectual epiphany. He realized that because he could choose between these views, that we could imagine both points of view in fact, meant it really was a choice. Some may think that itself is a delusion; but that way leads to total skepticism, the belief that there is no objective reality, and thus life itself is a lie. Considering the choices, I go with James and believe freedom is real. Mind you, I do not say I know freedom is real, only that it jibes with experience - our daily experience. Nor do I mean political freedom but the more basic freedom that our choices are real choices and have real outcomes.

Now, if this is true, certain things follow that must also be true. Most importantly, it means that reality as a whole includes our freedom of choice in its nature. If what we did had no actual effect on the world it would not be real, would it? And if that's true, that our freedom of will is making an actual difference, infinitesimal perhaps but real, then new things are happening in and to the world. The world is changing because of them. We are not the only ones making changes. The weather is unpredictable and has real effects on the earth. Some asteroid somewhere is wandering around and will collide with us. Our freedom to choose is just part of a larger freedom at work.

By contrast, in a determinist universe, where everything happens for a reason, nothing really changes. It may seem to, but it's an illusion. That earthquake or this volcano eruption is part of a larger scheme that does not really effect any real change overall. And if that is so, then whether you get cancer or shoot your wife is also part of a larger plan. No act has any real consequence and, lacking consequence, it lacks meaning.

In a free universe, though, things really do change. New stuff is created all the time. And with that new stuff come results that change things around them, as a billiard ball hits and propels another. Nothing suggests this better than the birth of human beings, who have minds thinking individual thoughts and doing things that were not there before.

This sounds exhilarating, but it is also frightening. How can one find direction or purpose in a universe where chance and change and choice are always going on? Imagine a city where the streets change every day and no map is ever accurate. More important, change makes the world seem volatile, and we all want some stability so that all this new stuff does not make the universe fly into zillions of bits.

This is where some free will people bring God in. They see God as the traffic cop of the universe, making sure it all plays by the rules. It's another version of the argument from design, in which we deduce from the fact that the universe is orderly (and order is a sign of reason) that cosmic reason designed it to be this way, otherwise there would be chaos. These people reject complete divine determinism for a compromise in which God could be in total charge but chose not to be. Deists are an example.

In the end, though, we do not need God even to do this job. What people want is not control but coherence, a sense that it all holds together, which is possible within the fabric of ordinary reality. I'll show how in a moment, but the reason God is not needed here is due to the medieval scholar William of Occam who famously reasoned that the simplest solution that satisfies the conditions is more likely to be the answer. God is more complicated than necessary for this question.

Do you know a song by the band, *Gorillaz*: "I'm happening, I'm feeling glad. I've got sunshine in a bag. I'm useless, but not for long. The future is coming on." The simplest answer that satisfies the question is in those last 2 sentences: "I'm useless but not for long. The fu-

ture is coming on.”

When we are born we are useless, pure potential but of no useful value. Over time we grow and learn, becoming a creature that acts and thinks, deliberates and so on. This goes on throughout life. As a clergyman I know it goes on even to the very end. I have seen it. We continue to change and can learn all through our lives.

Time and life seem pointed in one direction, what the physicist calls the ‘arrow of time’ and time’s arrow leads to personal decline and death, which we think is bad. Contrast that with the cells in our body that are born and live and die, which we do not think of as bad, or the flowers that grow and wither and go to seed. We see those changes as part of the nature of things, not a tragedy.

Though our personal place in the universe is limited and finite, leading to death, and since the only way to grow is to change (and change is by definition going from one thing to another, outgrowing *what is* for something new), that may be what decline, decay and death are about. But what, then, is the universe growing?

That, dear friend, is another subject, one for another letter. But before we can go there, we need to agree on some basic ideas implied so far but in need of being said explicitly. If we do not, what comes next will not make much sense.

- There is one reality of which we truly know, that is, all people agree exists. And we are part of it as much as any comet or mosquito. In that reality there is a unity, despite all the parts, which is why we call it a uni-verse. The laws we know from physics testify that it is one thing because the same rules apply everywhere.

- This universe may be changing all the time but it is still one universe. This is no small matter, for the idea that it is a universe, a single entity at some level, implies a unity that transcends complexity. This quality is what Paul Tillich called the “ground of being,” and what Martin Heidegger called “being-itself.” Is-ness.

- This also means that change and choice are not exceptional but in some measure part of being itself. Yes, those apes and even some of those bigger have something like a mind. We see personality traits in dogs and cats, but even smaller and simpler forms, flies, amoebas, flowers, stones are part of this.

Really? Thanks to Werner Heisenberg and Neils Bohr and others we know that even within the laws of physics there is variation and change. Subatomic particles are unpredictable and random in their motion. Within their tiny spaces they vary in orbit and direction. The fact that we consciously decide things does not mean the fox does not think when deciding whether to pursue the brown rabbit or the white one, which is itself but a more subtle form of selecting which flower has pollen, and so on down to the random wobble of electrons. Being, itself, includes freedom, and it is from this room for change, however tiny it may seem, that we emerged. Pile up all the things that can change and eventually a creature will exist that is equipped to deal with it with the thing we call thinking.

It may just be that we have had it backwards all along. It is not that we can think and therefore can choose, but that we could choose and thus thought. We humans express it in complex ways, animals in less complex ways, but at no point does the freedom of change completely vanish, not even in atoms.

- And if this is so, then several very hard questions are just begging to be answered. If the universe contains freedom and chance and choice in its nature, then evil is inescapable. For how can there be freedom and not the freedom to do wrong or make mistakes? And if this unity can sustain itself, does it require an outside force to keep it together? Is God necessary? And what about the future? Is this free place just a random sequence of events, or is there a direction? And if so, how does that jibe with the law of freedom?

One possible answer lies in that song. We seemed wired to know and to grow. If we are typical of reality, not exceptional, then consider this observation by the late clergyman A. Powell Davies: "Life is just a chance to grow a soul." Perhaps the universe is "growing a soul." Perhaps everything that is, is in the soul-growing business.

But now I do get ahead of myself. So let me stop here. That's a lot to think about. I have been thinking about it for most of my life, which is longer than you've been alive. Now it's your turn. So as Paul concluded his second letter to Timothy with simple greetings to Priscilla and Aquila, so I offer greetings for you and those near and dear. "God be with your spirit, Grace be with you," he said, and I wish you the same

Sincerely,

*WFW*