

**Trinity Church Wall Street 11:15am Holy Eucharist – Trinity Sunday
The Rev. Phillip A. Jackson Sermon Transcript**

“Changing How We Understand the Very Nature of the Cosmos”

"Worship in the ancient world was based on the propitiation (appeasing) of the gods-- a fear-based system," said the Rev. Phillip A. Jackson at today's 11:15 service. But we still do this! "You've got a big concert coming up and you wear your lucky t-shirt, or your lucky socks, or you have to take your lucky route. We all have our thing, and if we don't do this thing, we feel that the cosmos will get thrown off, and we'll suffer for it."

As Christians, there is no lucky pair of socks. God has overturned this relationship. In this, is Love: "Not that we love God, but that he loved us and he sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice of our sins." We no longer need to fear God. We participate in the Love that God has for us, and share that Love with others.

The readings are Acts 8:26–40; Psalm 22:24–30; 1 John 4:7–21; and John 15:1–8.

Sermon Transcript:

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Please be seated.

Welcome. Good to see you all. Thank you for being here and thank you all for watching us on the webcast today. I want to say just a few reflections on the second lesson we heard from 1st John, Chapter 4, verses 7-21, which I am calling changing how we understand the very nature of the cosmos. I'm going to say something first about religion in the ancient world in the time of Jesus. Now this of course, is going to be cursory and abbreviated. But one concept to bear in mind about religion in the ancient world is that it was based upon the propitiation of the gods, a fancy word for saying appeasing them; keeping the gods happy by offering things, or performing acts in order to gain or regain the gods' favor, or goodwill, or that maybe even they would just leave you alone. For example, let's say you were in the Eastern Mediterranean and wanted to sail in late October to the West, you would undoubtedly offer some form of sacrifice to Poseidon in order that you would have a safe journey.

You might even offer something to the gods of the winds so that the winds would be favorable and carry you safely. That was the basic system under which they operated. The gods demanded certain things, we were to provide them. The gods needed sacrifice, we provided sacrifice in order to ensure, as I said, goodwill, blessing, or just not bad. Now, this was obviously a very fear-based system. If you didn't do the right thing or didn't offer the right sacrifice, you might be open to getting some bad stuff, it was very fear-based and people tried to keep the gods mollified and happy. To understand this system, you might consider the depth of how it has lasted even to this day. What do I mean by that? Consider your lucky blank, whatever that is, you have a lucky something. You've got a big concert coming up your area and you put on your lucky t-shirt or your lucky socks, or you have to take a certain route to get there because that's your lucky route, yes some nods right there. We all have our thing.

It's so hilariously absurd. Because even in our household, Peggy and I, when we watch college basketball, we have certain items we have to wear to bring good luck to the team. As if there's a link between what we're wearing, on some cosmic level, from what we're wearing to how this team plays, etc. We all have these kinds of things, and we all believe, if you don't do it right, you'll suffer. You don't do it right, if you have to take a different route or if you have to wear a different pair of socks there's something, we all feel that somehow the cosmos will get thrown off and we will suffer somehow for it. Now, just so we're all clear, in Christian theology and Christian understanding, there is no lucky pair of socks. We blew that up 2,000 years ago. There's no lucky socks, there's no right way to take the right route to increase your chances of singing well, we blew that up. One of the places we blew that up was in the theology of John. We call Johannine theology, found in the Gospel of John, in the letters of John. In today's 1st John lesson, I wish to give you two examples of how he does this and what he says.

In verse 10, John points out, that God Himself overturns this relationship. Listen to this. He says, "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us." Notice that, not that we loved God and did the right thing, but that God loved us and really, not that we offered a sacrifice to please God and keep God mollified, but listen to what he said, "And He sent His Son to be this atoning sacrifice for our sins." God, in other words, completely overturned the system of the cosmos as the ancients understood it. That's what John says. Completely changed it, completely upside-downed it. It's no longer from us to God keeping God happy. Although notice we all hang onto that, don't we? But the claim is much more radical. It is that God loved us so much, that God provided the very sacrifice of the thing He loved best and most, His Son. Because He loved us. "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us."

In 1 John 4:18, he makes another startling claim that I want to just underscore. He says this "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear, for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love." No more fear of punishment, he says, for those who rest in God, who abide in God, who love God. Punishment's off the table. There's no more, it's done. No more fear. Of course, this is all rooted in a Johannine passage that you know quite well. Tell me if you've ever heard this passage, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish, but have eternal life." It's the same thing. It's the same concept. For God so loved the world, that He gave that which was most precious and best for Him so that we might be saved and have eternal life. It is extremely difficult for us with our ears, hear these words and experience the same dislocating shock which the ancients would have felt. Really it's hard as it has become so familiar. I mean, we see them at sporting events, we have John 3:16. It's a throwaway.

But in the ancient world, those words were truly shocking. Well, why? One is we hear something's different. Let's take the word love. There in this Johannine text says "God loves us." We use the word love with quite a bit of silly imprecision, don't we? For quite a huge concept. Like we say, "I love cats," or we say, "I love chocolate," or "I love basketball." You turn around and say, "I love this person," or "I love fly fishing." It's really imprecise the way we use it. Not here, not in the text today. This kind of love is not that kind of love. This is not romantic love, this is not an enjoyable activity kind of love. This is a love that is willing to give the best of itself for the beloved. You get that? This is a love so deep that it's willing to sacrifice itself for the beloved. The ancients would have heard that and said, "Wait a minute, you're claiming that God loves us in that way? That makes no sense." They did say, That makes no sense, because our job is to keep God happy and to show that we loved God.

Meanwhile, Christians started saying, "No, actually God loved us first." It's quite remarkable and quite shocking to the ancient ear. The other thing is that Christianity said, we didn't need to fear of the gods.

We no longer needed to fear them and keep them at bay or keep them happy. That we could participate in the love that God has for us, and then as being full and abiding in the love that God has for us, we then turn and love our brothers and sisters. You see the movement there? God loves us, we then turn, love God and love our brothers and sisters. Which is why this text here is quite remarkable and quite shocking. When He says, "If you say you love God, but can't love your brother or sister, you're not abiding in God." The love that God gives to us is meant to be shared amongst the community, to be taken and given out. Again, it's hard for us to appreciate because it's so much in the air we breathe. The Christian faith is so much in the air we breathe. How truly shocking this message was and why it was good news. It was gospel.

Amen.