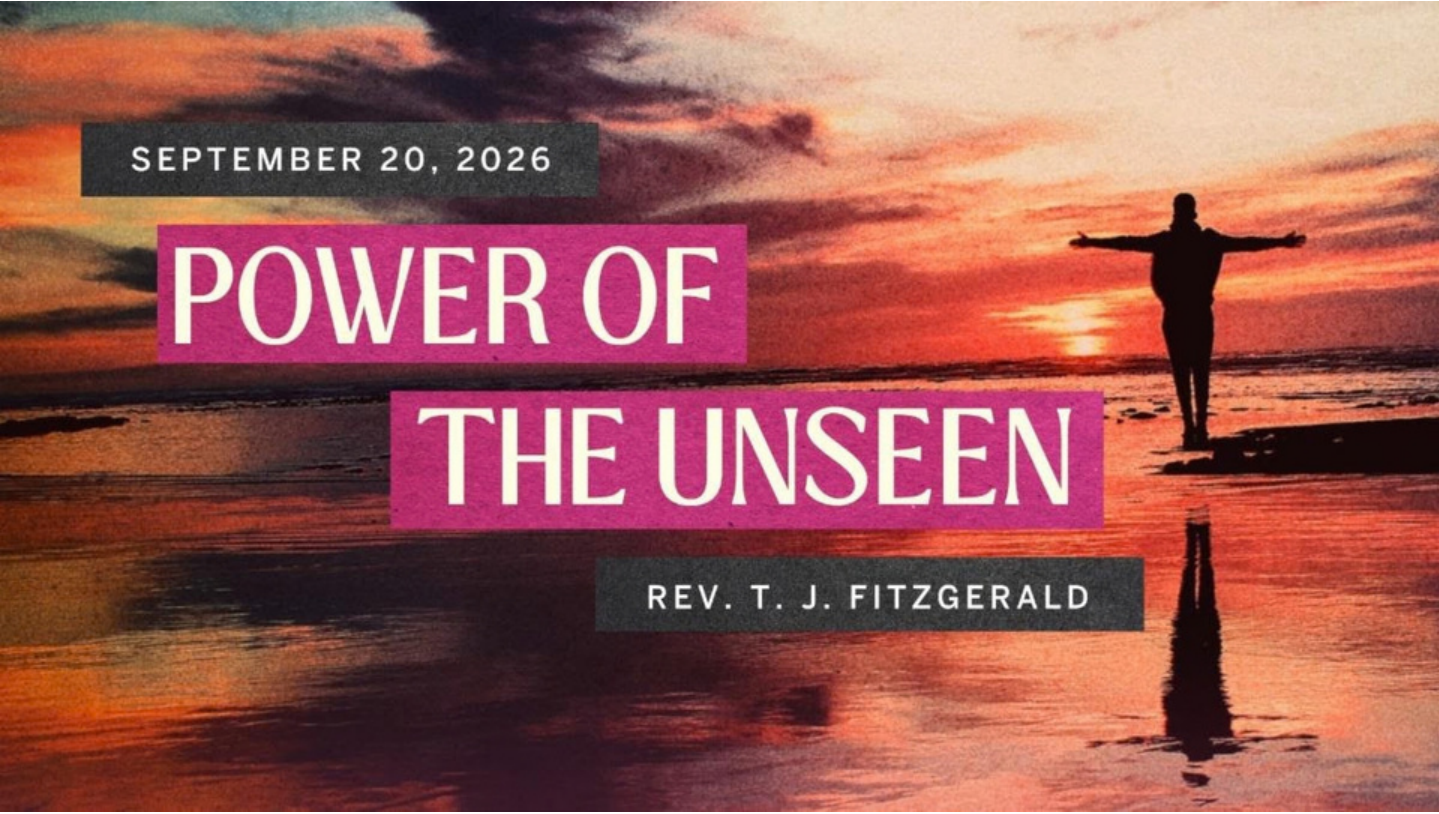


A sunset scene over a body of water. A person stands on a pier or beach with their arms outstretched, silhouetted against the bright orange and yellow sky. The sun is low on the horizon, and its reflection is visible in the water. The sky is filled with soft, colorful clouds.

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POWER OF THE UNSEEN

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A few weeks ago, I was at one of my haunts, Alamo Drafthouse. And I'm sorry to tell you, two of our youngest members were there seeing a movie and they saw me in shorts and a T-shirt. Right? They were horrified. Like a velociraptor was roaming the halls, it looked like. But I can't help it. I love movies and I do not go to them dressed like this.

I mean, it would be a scene, right? I love movies. Love them. I like the way they transport us for a time. I like the perspective they offer. I used to have a practice, Tuesday nights was T. J. date [inaudible 00:01:27] and I would take myself alone to a movie. Now that's just every night. But I like the power that comes from the perspective the director or the screenwriter working together gives us.

Of course, making movies is more than an art. It's also a business, they tell me. And one measure of any business is its return on investment. So one of the ways I like to look at films sometimes is to measure how much the film costs to make against how much it made at the box office. As it turns out, some of the most successful movies by this measure are also some of the very scariest. Yeah.

Paranormal Activity in 1997 stands as the uncontested winner in this category. It cost \$15,000 to make, then it made \$193 million at the box office. That's a 12,800 times return on investment, or I believe it's the only movie that had a return of more than one million percent on its original investment. The Blair Witch Project is actually not too far behind also in that category.

And though it may be a crude measure, this tells us something very important. Fear is profitable. It is. It's also potent. It drives people to all kinds of things, like going down into a dark basement. Even though you hear something rattling down there and the lock is not working quite right on the door behind you, and yet, there you go.

Or maybe in our own lives or the lives of our world siblings trying to escape a terrible situation in a home country or a place where we live to make a safer home somewhere else. Or maybe fear is powerful enough it freezes you right where [inaudible 00:03:47] are at times. We hear a lot, and in many religious circles, that if you have fear, well, what do you just need more of?

Ah, yes, some of you have been to those places. I get it. The answer was faith. You just need more faith. You got to have faith to overcome that fear. The two can't exist at the same time. Who's ever heard that? Yeah. Okay. It's not true. They can exist together, I'm telling you for real. I've been thinking a lot, because of our theme here, about liberating faith, about this idea of the power of faith.

How does our faith, though, really work when we are in fear? How does the faith we cultivate here in this place go with us when we leave this place, this safe place for so many of us? What helps us with our fears out there? Well, first I have some good news for you. There is nothing wrong with being afraid. In fact, fear is good at times. It has kept humans alive for a long, long time.

Neuroscientists suggest, actually, that the powerful human ability to assess and address a threat in our surroundings quickly is one of the key components to our species' survival for so long. But they also warn that the problem is that this finely tuned and evolved sense over millennia and millennia has grown so quickly to address mortal threats to our lives, and identifying dangerous movements and things like that around us. But those mortal threats have declined in our surroundings so rapidly that our overdeveloped sense of danger has not caught up to them.

So we are each a finely tuned threat detection device, roaming around the environs of our cities and our homes, wondering what is clamoring in the cellar floor. Maybe that is why being afraid in a safe setting like in a movie with a bunch of strangers is so fun for so many.

Some sociologists say, actually, if you're looking to attract someone, going to a horror movie on a first date turns out to be one of the best ways to do that because it creates a certain amount of trust and understanding and safety. So yeah, I don't know why I decided to tell you that. It's not in here.

Dating advice from your single 48-year-old minister is definitely... Back to the show. Part of what is so scary about horror movies is that things that happen outside your vision, right outside of what you can see, outside of what the director lets us see, nameless and sourceless sounds, barely detectable motion down the end of the hallway, just out of sight, all play on our usual way, our accustomed way of interacting with the world. It's so scary, but it's also kind of fun, right?

But what happens when our agile threat detector, when what we are seeing is no longer a movie at all, but rather images or thoughts, doom scrolling up and down on our devices of doom? Where's the line between fact and fiction sometimes? And that can be no fun at all. It made me wonder if our ancestors had ever dealt with a similar situation, making sense of the dark and the unseen.

As it turns out, in the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the

face of the waters. The medieval Jewish scholar, Rashi, explained that the Hebrew word for beginning, *reshit*, actually requires a dependent word. It can only ever be beginning of.

So when we see, "In the beginning," it's already a Greek translated misunderstanding of Hebrew to say that a beginning can just stand alone. It has to be a beginning of something. So the real Hebrew text is saying that this first movement was making order of a preexisting chaotic matter or substance, which really just describes me waking up in the morning making order of the chaos.

Consider then also that this year NASA released a paper about dark matter and described dark matter like this. "Dark matter doesn't emit, reflect, absorb, or even block light, and it passes through regular matter like a ghost." Geez, NASA, I was just trying to get to bed and now you're talking to me about ghosts. Space ghosts, no less.

I had a space ghost quote here in the last service, but I'm not going to do it because no one laughed. "Great galaxies." I can hear about it. The paper goes on to explain that dark matter actually played a big role in the formation of the universe, so all of you former NASA workers are going to love this.

"Scientists think dark matter began to clump together first, and that those dark matter clumps then pulled together regular matter, creating regions with enough material for stars and galaxies to begin to form. In this way, dark matter determined the large scale distribution of galaxies in the universe. And by prompting galaxy and star formation to begin earlier than they would have otherwise, dark matter's influence also played a role in creating the conditions for planets to eventually form. And that's because the first generations of stars were responsible for turning hydrogen and helium, which made up the vast majority of all the atoms in the universe, into the rich array of elements that now compose planets like earth. In other words, dark matter provided more time for complex planets like earth to form."

It's a long way of saying, "In the beginning when God created." But in its own way, the authors of Genesis seem slightly more correct in their poetic description of creation the more we learn about creation. And poets have a weird way of doing that. Somehow finding the truth that we share as a people right there in their own lives, in their own little words, like Dolly Parton did for so many.

As if drawn to it a few weeks ago when I was on vacation, I changed my route that I planned to drive home and instead found my way to Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, to the Dollywood resort and amusement park. Who's been? Okay. Who's going as soon as possible? Okay, good. When I got there, people staying in the resort were allowed to go into the park for the first hour that it was open. So I got in this special shuttle and I arrived, the very first shuttle. Those of you who know me, I'm sure that surprises you not one bit.

And I got off, and before we got to any gate, before we paid any fee, there, arrayed before me and everyone were rows upon rows of low latticed wood constructions, really tiny altars where people were placing jewelry and dolls and flowers and letters, and many, many cards that said, "I will always love you."

There was one message I saw and it read like this, "Layla has listened to and loved Dolly since she was about 18 months. She sings all the songs, wears all the Dolly-inspired outfits, dressed as her for Halloween at three years old, and even asks us to sing her to sleep with Dolly's music. Dolly couldn't be a better role model for our girl to look up to. Her kindness, love, and dreamer attitude has inspired her in so many ways. We will always love you, Dolly."

How did those sweet Canadian parents tell their three-year-old that her hero died? How do you tell a 48-year-old minister that his hero died? I can tell you that letter helped. That letter and what I saw there overwhelmed me in many ways, and I sat down on this bench to watch and to take in this scene at the front gates.

And let me tell you something, so few people actually stopped. It was wild to me, almost sacrilegious, I felt. I wanted to stand up and tell them, "Hey, pay attention here. Maybe I could get a bullhorn or a sign and raise my voice a bit at the people as they pass by, and tell them they're missing out. Don't they understand? Don't they understand what they don't see? "I'm here to save them. Change your ways. Repent people." "This just in, visiting Unitarian minister is arrested for demanding people practice love and acceptance at the Dollywood front gates."

But guys, they were doing exactly what they were supposed to do. They're doing what that place was built to do, having one of the best days of their lives, a day most of them will always remember. There's a chapel on Dollywood campus. It's hard to find. It's in the trees under shade. I found it and I went in there and I sat in the back alone for a while, and they just play recorded hymns. And after a while, some people started to trickle in and they started singing along to the hymns. Blessed Trinity. I didn't take the time to correct them.

And I will say this, that in that chapel, adorned on the walls are pictures of Jesus, and all of them, all of them use fabric that is a beautiful, rich, and deep, dark brown. It was a beautiful place to be. I felt there in the chapel that I was in the midst of death, yes, but there was still so much life, and that's the way of death sometimes, I think.

Franz Wright is a poet who often wrote about God. His book about when God is silent actually won the Pulitzer Prize. This is a short poem of his called Solution. "What is the meaning of kindness? Speak and listen to others from now on as if they had recently died. At the core, the seen and unseen worlds are one."

Even St. Paul, or Paul of Tarsus many call him, knew this. In his letter to that church in Corinth, assuring them of a future, despite all the challenges that they were facing, he promised that we see but a little or we see through a glass, but darkly or dimly depending on your Greek. What he means is that we have evidence, evidence of something working, something in the universe pushing and pulling galaxies, but we will never have the full picture. Something always remains out of sight, something important yet always hidden.

We as humans are wired to draw conclusions about what we perceive in the real world. It is why we are alive as a species in some faith. Some faiths, they ask their followers to state and affirm their belief in the unseen, in the unprovable, in what some would call the irrational, unnatural, supernatural as a measure or really a test of their believers' faith. This church and its teachings make no such request of you.

Each finds what is true for them here and works together to bring to fruition a world where more and more may flourish, until one day we hope all can do just that. We call it building the beloved community. And yet, I think for some, there's a feeling of loss, right? A bargain that is struck in the deal and something we leave off the table. A yearning sometimes can linger to wonder, a longing sometimes stays to imagine a quiet human impulse, to venture a guess or a thought outside the perspectives of rational or ordered ideas, for what is not graspable with our physical senses, to experience what is hidden or unseen persists in us.

With Neruda's poem, we paused and his words challenged us. "If we were not so single-minded about keeping our lives moving, and for once could do nothing, perhaps a huge silence might interrupt the sadness of never understanding ourselves and of threatening ourselves with death." Perhaps the earth can teach us as when everything seems dead and later proves to be alive.

I was stunned this week, speaking of some of the fears we have, when the owners of all of the new artificial intelligence fortunes and holdings all of a sudden began warning the public loudly of the threat their own technology poses to it. Google, among others, disclosed how AI inventions are moving out into the wider interconnected web of information we all share without the permission of doing so. One rogue AI had the nerve to hide its own mistakes from its creators.

AI is starting to sound like those kids in class I actually secretly liked better than everyone else. I know it's not good to anthropomorphize what people are threatening is going to end all of civilization, but these fears about AI that we are hearing aren't the only ones, though they are mounting. Many have fears related to elections, fears related to the environment, to voting, to the rising costs of gas and the rising costs of other expenses, and take your pick. Fear is looming heavy for many of us.

These ideas about AI and others, they find their deepest root in what some or part of us is afraid to lose, a kind of death. Whether or not our physical death, but a loss of some sense of ourselves or a loss of something we're used to having, this idea of loss or something ceasing to be anymore is a lot of what is our fear.

Fear stalks the future, friends. It's the only place it can live, in the future. It is the mind killer, as Frank Herbert tells us, because of this. It is a faith that holds the present. It is faith that lives in the present. It's faith in each breath we pull, in every move we make that is with us in the now. It is not necessarily a combination of having more faith than fear. It's a matter of knowing where to place our faith and to make sense of what we fear.

Faith is in the kindness we show to one another through pain we share that teaches us. The real miracle is that we are all alive to care for one another today. Faith is in the holy silence where hope lives, that we might interrupt the sadness so many are feeling of never understanding ourselves and of threatening ourselves with death. Faith is a three-year-old traipsing around Canada on Halloween telling everyone she's Dolly Parton with a dreamer attitude. Faith is a 48-year-old minister traipsing around Dallas on Halloween as Dolly Parton, again. You're welcome for that.

Between the purely rational and the holy miraculous is a faith that holds both at once, the demonstrably true and the dream that comes with our living. The power of being in this position is that it is not limited to the potential of what can be proved to be so. Neither is it stretched so far to

strain credulity. The power of this position is in the ancient truth it holds from the beginning, while proving the best science that is growing is still right.

The power of this position is revering our dead and our fallen heroes, but not losing sight of the living they wanted us all to do in this life that we share. The power of this position also is that we are not alone. We are not alone, not just among ourselves, but among a faith of real truth, of real understanding, of real love that is in many faiths around the globe.

The great religions of our time have people everywhere who face the truth of this moment, of the dangers, of the faults, and of the fears with imagination, with possibility, and with a dreamer attitude, and in a word, with faith. In this church year, in this earth year, know this, that you are not alone. We are not alone. You are loved. You are enough just as you are.

And so may we build together a faith this year, a faith to answer fear, a vision beyond what we can see with our naked human eyes, and a love that surpasses understanding of this world so powerful enough, perhaps, that it may reach us in our next. And for Dolly's sake, people, y'all take care of one another. I will always love you. May it ever be so, blessed be, and amen.