

Holiday Bookends

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Introduction

Just over two-and-a-half weeks ago, on March 14th, one of the most famous scientists of our generation died: Dr. Stephen Hawking. I always enjoy reading what people say about someone who died, and the tributes that followed the announcement of Hawking's death were fascinating reading. He was, not surprisingly, touted as a brilliant man, and as one of the great thinkers of our time. Those in the scientific community celebrated his theories and his formulas and all of his other intellectual achievements.

Hawking, I learned as I read what others wrote, was also known as someone with a great sense of humor – and he particularly was willing to be humorous at his own expense. That all led to numerous appearances on the *Simpsons* and to his being the frequent punchline in many episodes of *The Big Bang Theory*.

You might also know that, while still a college undergraduate Hawking was diagnosed with a rare form ALS (also known as Lou Gehrig's disease). He was originally given a life expectancy of two years – and then managed to outlive that prediction by about 50 years. But because of way this disease attacks the human body, Hawking spent most of his adult life in a wheelchair.

That wheelchair became a weapon of sorts for him. If he didn't like you, he would use his wheelchair to run over your toes – accidentally, of course. The story was told by many of one particular high society event where he intentionally ran over the toes of England's Prince Charles multiple times. Hawking was also quoted as having said “My greatest regret in life is not having the opportunity to run over the toes of Margaret Thatcher.”

In one of the quirks of the calendar, Hawking was born on the 300th anniversary of the death of another great scientist: Galileo, who would be known as “the father of the scientific method.” And Hawking died on the 139th anniversary of Albert Einstein's birthday: January 8, 1942 and March 14, 2018. Those two dates formed rather unique bookends on the celebrated life of Stephen Hawking.

Perhaps by yet another quirk, this year's calendar also provided us with bookends for our celebration of Lent.

BOOKEND #1: Ash Wednesday/Valentine's Day

As it does every year, the season of Lent begins on Ash Wednesday. But this year Ash Wednesday happened to fall on February 14, Valentine's Day. A day devoted to expressions of love. More than 114 million Hallmark cards were exchanged on Valentine's Day this year, each with its own unique way of saying “I love you” to the recipient.

That's very appropriate, I think, for Ash Wednesday kicks off an entire season that is meant to point us toward the cross – the ultimate expression of love:

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

Just hours before His death, in events we commemorated over these past few days, Jesus told His disciples that what He was about to do was the greatest possible expression of love:

Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. (John 15:13)

Now, Hallmark writes very pretty verses for its cards, but you won't find those words printed inside many of them, will you? You see, you and I know that that despite all of our best romantic efforts our love always falls far, far short of that kind of ultimate sacrifice. Our love has limits. We don't like to admit it, but we know that it is true. Read the local court news and you will see that the number of divorces granted now exceeds the number of marriage licenses issued. Even "for better, for worse 'til death do us part" is understood by our generation to be a conditional statement.

But the love of God expressed in the Lenten season is just the opposite. It has no limits. It has no conditions. It comes with no strings attached. Despite being the recipients of God's love since the beginning of time, human beings have consistently rebelled against God. We have lived as if there was no God and we have lived in direct defiance of the God who had created us. Keeping with our very nature, we have pushed away the loving gestures of the Almighty and have instead preferred the cheap thrills offered to us by the forces of evil that work among us. We opt to go our own way rather than follow the way prescribed for us by the God who loves us. The Bible calls all of that "sin" and it tells us clearly tells us that no one is exempt from it:

...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23)

And that the consequence of that sin is that we are all going to die:

For the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23)

But inside all of that bad news is good news: we also know that God sees our sin and continues to love us anyway... so much so that He ...

God demonstrated his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

That is the Good News of Easter! That is the essence of the Gospel Message. That is what we proclaim this day to a world that still needs to hear it! And that is why the

phrase "Christ is risen!" is proclaimed with so much joy and energy in Christian churches across the globe on this day!

It is that truth to which the Apostle Paul was referring to when he wrote the words of today's Epistle lesson:

By this gospel you are saved ... Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, he was buried, and he was raised on the third day ... (1 Corinthians 15:2-4)

That ultimate act of love opened up for us a way to experience the forgiveness of sin and to be granted the gift of a home in heaven once our time on earth has concluded.

There is no more appropriate way to begin Lent than to celebrate Valentine's Day!

BOOKEND #2: Easter/April Fool's Day

On the other end of the season of Lent we find our second holiday bookend. Easter, the official ending day of the Lenten season, coincides this year with April Fools' Day. Again ... an interesting quirk of the calendar.

King Solomon, the wisest man in the history of the world, knew the source of all wisdom. He wrote:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom... (Proverbs 9:10)

Not fear in the sense of being afraid, but instead being in reverent awe of the Eternal Creator. The opposite of that would be the one who chooses not to be in reverent awe, and the Bible calls that person a fool. King Solomon's father, King David, is the one who made the opposite observation:

The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." (Psalm 14:1)

Despite overwhelming evidence – found both in Scripture and in other non-biblical, historical documents –

- that Jesus Christ lived, preached, healed, died, was buried and rose again
- that the followers of Jesus Christ from the earliest of days lived lives that were significantly different than those who did not follow Him
- that these followers were willing to be eaten by lions, burned on the stake, decapitated, tortured and even crucified for their faithful adherence to what Jesus taught during His earthly ministry
- that these followers performed incredible acts of mercy and lived selfless, sacrificial lives

Some people, both then and now, still choose to live apart from a vital relationship with Jesus Christ. There is no other way to describe that decision; it is pure foolishness.

Lee Strobel was once an up-and-coming investigative journalist for the Chicago Tribune. He was also an atheist. One day his wife Leslie came home and announced to him that she had become a Christian.

Strobel was irate. "How," he thought, "could he be married to such a gullible woman?" So he set out to prove once and for all that Christianity was a farce. He pored through the pages of Scripture and all the other historical documents he could find. In the process of his investigation, he came across the words of our Epistle lesson:

(Jesus) was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time...Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also... (1 Corinthians 15:4-8)

Strobel had always believed the reports of these post-resurrection appearances were nothing more than the hallucinations of weak-minded and ignorant Christians. To help prove his point, he took this passage and his belief to a like-minded psychologist friend and asked:

If 500 people claimed to see Jesus after He died, is it possible it was just an hallucination?

The psychologist friend told him ...

...that hallucinations are an individual event. If 500 people have the same hallucination, that is a bigger miracle than a resurrection. (Lee Strobel)

Every objection Strobel had led to the same conclusion. So on November 8, 1981, Lee Strobel formally renounced his atheism and began to follow Jesus. He wrote:

I didn't become a Christian because God promised that I would have an even happier life than I had as an atheist. He never promised any such thing. Indeed, following him would inevitably bring divine demotions in the eyes of the world.

Rather, I became a Christian because the evidence was so compelling that Jesus really is the one-and-only Son of God who proved his divinity by rising from the dead. That mean that following him was the most rational and logical step I could possibly take. (Lee Strobel)

Stephen Hawking never got to that point in his life. A few years before his death Hawking made this statement:

Before we understand science, it is natural to believe that God created the universe. But science offers a more convincing explanation. (Through science) we can know everything that God would know, if there was a God, which there isn't. (Stephen Hawking)

Despite all the intelligence he had been given, Stephen Hawking made an incredibly foolish statement. It is one I'm sure he now regrets.

APPLICATION

You know, when I was a kid ... and truthfully still today ... whenever I see a dish of those Valentines candy hearts, I pick through the bowl until I find the special message I want to give to my best girl. I'm especially fond of the heart that reads "be mine." I'm always hopeful that her answer will be "yes." I went through a few lean years in middle school, but I'm on a pretty good run these days. My best girl has said yes to my invitation for a whole bunch of years now.

Every Lenten season – even those that do not begin on Valentine's Day – present us with a similar invitation, for:

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

I love you, He says. Won't you be mine?

The invitation is clear. It is a matter of following the path chosen by Lee Strobel and putting your trust in the God who loves you with the greatest love the world can ever know. Believing doesn't mean you have all your questions answered. It just means that you are willing to bank on His way as being the right way for your life and your future.

You can do that right you are, and you can do it right now. How will you respond?

Let us pray.