CHAPTER 1

SOME OF THE STARS ARE MISSING

A conversation:

Wow.

Yes. Impressive, aren't they?

Unbelievable.

And you haven't seen a fraction of them.

How many are there?

I don't count them.

But you make them.

We cause them, might be a better way of saying it.

We? How many of you are there?

One. But I don't count myself, either. There's no need.

It would take forever to count the stars.

Waste of time, too, By the time you finished, there would be a whole crop of new ones, and others would be gone, so you'd have to go back to the beginning. Besides, counting things is something only you people do. There's really no need.

Really? Somebody said that the numbers come from God and we discover the rest.

That was Pythagoras. A little before your time.

Did you know that he was the first to teach that the planets orbit the sun?

I did know that.

Can you see them all?

I am them all.

The stars are gods?

No. They can't be me, but I am them.

Wait . . . .

It's complicated.

I can't see you.

You don't have to. You are in me.

We don't see much in the way of stars in New York—well, we see plenty of celebrities, of course, but I mean stars in the sky. We might see the North Star. We might see Venus, down near the horizon. This summer Venus and Jupiter met and kept company for a while, which caused quite a stir. But mostly there's too much competition. When the entire city lost power in 1987 and again in 2003, the bridges filled each night with New Yorkers, gazing up in wonder at the night sky. Many of them had never seen so many stars. We have substantially more than our share of ambient light here. The stars literally pale by comparison.

It is not so in the country. Walking in the dark one Friday night at Holy Cross Monastery, an hour up the Hudson River from the city, I could barely find my way to the guest house from the parking lot. I wondered uneasily if it were true that bears had been seen with increasing frequency thereabouts and if one of them might not at that moment be making his way over to the monastery's garbage cans to enjoy some of the brothers' supper leftovers. But when I happened to glance upward, I stopped in my tracks, forgetting all about the bears: the stars were so bright, the sky so black. And there were so *many* stars, and they so seemed to lean right out of heaven toward me, as if I could have reached up and plucked one. I stood there for a long time. Finally I managed to tear myself away from that overwhelming beauty and went inside. I wanted to tell somebody what I had seen, but it was late. The house was in silence. I climbed the stairs to my room on the third floor and went to bed. I was still happy about it as sleep found me—there were so many stars, and they were so beautiful.

They are far away, the stars. The light emanating from them must travel billions of miles, billions upon billions, before it meets my eye. Even at the speed of light, the journey of a star's light to my eye takes a long, long time. Millions of years.

Billions of years. By the time I experience it, it may well have ended its existence. It may have gone on to whatever next act awaits a twinkling star—the red giant phase, perhaps, or the white dwarf. It may be in the process of blowing up. Or it may have done so already, and may now be imploding, shrinking down and down into a dense darkness capable of sucking into itself anything that comes near. Whatever it is doing, it is not doing now what I see it doing now, twinkling in the sky. That moment is over.

So I am not seeing that star as it is when I see it. I am seeing it as it was. I am seeing that star's past, in my present.

I am seeing that star's past *in my present*.

But wait—it is not quite right to say that the moment I behold is over. It cannot be over, not if I am beholding it. Though it is no longer true for that star in that place at that time, it is true for me, in my space and time. Both moments are true. The past and the present exist simultaneously. And if that is so, the future must also be there. My future is someone else's present, someone else's past. All my eras exist. They just do so at different times.

This is the *alsolife*. This must be what existence in time and space is for God. Christianity in the West has made much of our God as a God of history, and has expected God's will to find expression in what happens there. But, though the work of God can be discerned in history, it cannot be true that the God of history is *contained* in history—it must be the other way around. *He's got the whole world in his hands*, goes the old spiritual, and in its simplicity it speaks a profound truth: All events in history are contained in God. Nothing is outside of God's time or outside of God's existence. If there were a time outside of God—beyond God, before God, after God, other than God—then we would not be talking about God, would we? God must be, as Paul put it, "all in all."

Let us switch places. Now we are on one of the planets orbiting that faraway star, looking back at the earth. We are using the telescopes that planet's inhabitants have developed, which are far superior to any we have, and so we can see the neighborhood clearly, and in great detail. There's your house, and your cat in the yard. There's your neighbor, working in his garden. There's your teenager, texting somebody on her phone. *This is some telescope,* you might say to your extraterrestrial host, and he would lower his seven eyes modestly and say it was nothing, really.

But by the time we see all this, your teenager and your cat and your neighbor have been gone for years. Millennia. Eons. Your house is gone. The earth is gone. The sun may be gone, too. By the time we visitors to that distant planet behold your neighborhood through our fancy borrowed telescope, it has all been gone for a long, long time. We are looking in the present of our location in space, but that is not what we are seeing. We may be looking in the present, but we are seeing the past.

Think of it: In such an extreme, imaginary look through a telescope that may not exist, we would peer into the past. Someone else, I suppose, in some other faraway place, could have been looking at us at the same moment, and the present in which we were living would be that being's past, too. *When* it was would have a lot to do with *where* it was.

Go to an Easter vigil, late at night on Holy Saturday. A fire is kindled in the dark. It is called the "new fire." A fresh paschal candle, as beautifully ornamented as the parish can afford, is brought to the priest, who may prepare it by inserting five red nails into the cross incised in the wax. "Christ," the priest says, inserting the nails one by one, "Yesterday, today, and tomorrow. The Beginning and the End. The First and the Last. He is the Alpha and the Omega. His are the times and His the seasons. To Him be glory, forever and ever." Then the priest

lights the candle from the new fire, and the central liturgy of the Christian year begins once more.

The Great Vigil of Easter, then, which marks Christ's crossing from death to life, is also a liturgy about time. In the Easter Vigil, the past is brought forward into the present. The creation of the world, and the terror of its inundation. The central miracle of the Hebrew people in their deliverance at the Red Sea. The devastating conundrum of how Abraham is to relate to God, posed unthinkably in the aborted sacrifice of his son. The fanciful re-membering of the dry bones that Ezekiel saw. The hope and the glimpse of life beyond the boundaries of the life we know. These stories are told again, slowly unfolding once more. The Easter Vigil is not a service for people in a hurry. It takes time to tell all the stories.

When the Vigil begins, we are still tired and sore from Good Friday. It soaked us in history and death: a specific martyrdom, in a specific city, at a specific time. A specific man. Political and religious leaders whose names we know: Pontius Pilate, Caiaphas, Annas. Dense psychological accretions of centuries cling to Good Friday—combining with our exhaustion, they threaten to reduce the Crucifixion either to a tale about a monstrous political injustice or a fable about our personal misdeeds. But although the Passion narratives have been host to both ideas in later centuries, neither of them is complete on its own. The stories of the Vigil widen our focus, reminding us of *everything* that has made us what we are: the beauty, the love, the terror, the betrayal, the hope. In the darkness, lit only by candles, the stories locate themselves in a matrix larger than any one place or time. It is as if we soared high above the surface of the earth, beholding all its beauties and all its sorrows. Our faith isn't just about a wrongful death, nor is it about an essentially mercantile exchange of one innocent Victim for an entire race of the guilty. It is also about the life beyond the

boundaries of the life we know, the beating down not only of death, but of the ache of time. The only reason time hurts us at all is that it brings us closer to death—our own death, and the death of all we have loved. To know our provincial experience of linear time as part of a continuity, rather than the whole of what time is, is to begin to break free of its sting.

Listen:

When you were in school and began to study history, your teacher used a time line to help you locate important events and eras in their chronological order. If you were a child in the Western Hemisphere, the line began over on the left side of the blackboard with the beginning of the world. Then came plants and animals, simple one-celled life forms first, growing in complexity as the eons passed, up through dinosaurs and wooly mammoths and into the species we now know. Then humankind appeared, first as hunter-gatherers and then as farmers. City dwellers. The Hebrews and the pyramids and the Roman Empire. The birth of Christ. The Jewish diaspora. The conversion of Constantine, then the fragmentation of the Roman world and the centuries of the medieval era. The Renaissance and the age of exploration. On and on the line went, through wars, monarchs, inventions, disasters, ending in an arrow at the far right, pointing toward forever. The time line helped you in history class, helped you remember who came first, Columbus or Magellan (it was Columbus). If your school days were long ago, the time line had some important pieces missing, and you are still not sure when the Han Dynasty ruled China, and whether or not it coincided with the Chola Dynasty in India (it didn't).

We remember that line. We still find it useful. We reproduce it when we remember our own lives. *Let's see*, we say, trying to place something, *that was before Mom died, because she was there* or *Let's see, that must have been during the war, because we still*

had those awful dark shades on all the windows. We remember our lives in a line, a before-and-after linear progression of events. Linear time seems manifestly true to us, so obvious a fact as not to be worth mentioning.

But we are startled, sometimes, when we experience time in some other way. Almost always, our time line works, but there are occasions upon which it does not. The phenomenon of déjà vu is one—that eerie moment when you know what someone will say before she says it, and then she does. *Well, that was weird,* you think to yourself. It never lasts more than a moment or two, and then it is gone. It is not a frequent occurrence, but it is likely that most people have experienced déjà vu at least once in their lives. What is it?

An abundance of studies in neuroscience have offered explanations of déjà vu, none of which begin with anything like the idea that it might be an experience of something that is actually happening—that time itself might be elastic and relative to the position and experience of the subject. Perhaps that is an approach that should at least be considered: perhaps déjà vu should not automatically be considered an illusion. Knowing what we now know about the elasticity of our experience of time, it seems reasonable to factor this knowledge into our attempts to understand such a well-known human phenomenon. Perhaps déjà vu really *is* an instance in which we become unmoored in time for a moment. Perhaps, for a moment, we grasp the simultaneity of events in the whole dominion of God, in which past, present, and future are all one thing. Perhaps it is not a mistake at all, but rather a glimpse of a larger reality we are ordinarily unable to experience. Albert Einstein famously said that time is what we have so that everything doesn't happen all at once. But it may be that everything *does* happen all at once, and that linear time is merely the neurological model we create in order to accommodate our limited brains.

Perhaps linear time is earthly, and not cosmic: applicable only here, and not in the larger life that religious people call the kingdom of God. *Humankind cannot bear very much reality*, T. S. Eliot wrote, and it is so.[1]

You fall asleep and dream. In your dream, you are in your bedroom in your childhood home—but you are the age you are now. You hear your father downstairs, hear the clatter of cups and saucers as he prepares the tea for breakfast. Your father has been dead for many years, and in your dream you know this—but you go downstairs to the kitchen and there he is anyway, wearing the old grey cardigan he always wore at home, the teapot in his hands. Little is said between you—conversation seems not to be the purpose of this encounter. The two of you have become unmoored in time for a moment, breaching the walls of your separate spheres, bridging the gap between the living and the dead. You awaken, bemused. It seemed so real.

It was only a dream. You know that, after a few waking seconds.

But who are we to say a dream is not real? The ancients believed wholeheartedly in the power of God to speak to human beings in dreams. An impoverished modern definition of truth over the last three hundred years or so—one that sought to reduce reality to mere measurable fact—dismissed this possibility. More recently, though, we have found it possible to recover some lost ground. Might there be more to dreams than illusion, after all? Must our dreams be, of necessity, only misplaced fragments of our waking reality and nothing more? Neuropsychology knows them to be the figurative and symbolic work of the part of the brain that thinks in pictures, symbols, puns, and metaphors—the part that becomes active while the list-making, analytical part of the brain takes a break. We

1 T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," in *The Four Quartets* (1935).

know that this part of us also considers the stuff of our lives, in its way. *Why don't you sleep on it,* someone says about a knotty problem, and we awaken the next day with a fresh insight. No, your dream is not real like your second-period class will be real later on this morning. But it may be real in another way—real, but not part of the linear arrangement upon which we habitually depend to order our reality. What if your dream is an experience of another dimension that cuts across the ones through which we ordinarily see things, the dimensions of time and space?

Philosophers and theologians speak of time using two different Greek words: *chronos* and *kairos*. *Chronos* is the time of the earth, the passing of seconds and minutes, hours, weeks, years, millennia. *Chronos* is about duration. How long does it take? How long have you been here? How long is it until supper time? *Chronos* is the time of the time line in school.

The other word for time is *kairos*. *Kairos* is the time of God. Sometimes it breaks into our chronological world. The Bible describes such moments in various ways: the appointed time, the fullness of time, the right time, the time fulfilled. *Kairos* contains *chronos* but is not bound by it. *Chronos* can never contain *kairos,* but it can be reshaped by it.

The physics of our era describes the elasticity of time, introducing us all to the slippery idea that things don't exist in time and space except in relation to other things. All of us, and everything else that exists, does so in space-time, and our location in space-time is dependent upon one another's location. *When* I am is relative to *where* I am, and the reverse is also true. In travel through space we will see this, if we ever travel far enough and fast enough: time on the spacecraft will pass in the usual earthly way. The ship's clocks will still work, the digital calendars will still mark the days, which will still be twenty-four hours long. When we come home, though, we will

discover that the days that were twenty-four hours long for us on the ship were somehow longer here, that our dear ones will have grown older than we have. We will be like Rip Van Winkle awakening after his long sleep, which seemed to him but an afternoon's nap: We will return to a world profoundly changed, unrecognizable to us. And it won't just *seem* so; it will really *be* so. The absolute categories of a Newtonian world fall short of describing the whole picture of the universe—they work well enough here on the earth, but they don't work everywhere all of the time. Time on the earth is really a measure of change, and change requires that something be lost: I went to college and therefore was no longer in high school. I married, and therefore was no longer single. My hair turned grey and I was no longer a blonde. That was then and this is now. *Chronos*. *Chronos* is a measure of loss.

But then and now must *both* be present still, in the larger domain of God. Nothing can be absent from God. In the domain of God, there can be no *duration*. Things just *are*. In *kairos*, nothing is lost.

He's got the whole world in his hands. Nothing is truly simultaneous in *chronos*. When I speak to you and you answer, my question is already in the past. When I climb the stairs the step from which I just lifted my foot is in the past, and my next step is in the future. The two steps are close together in time, but they are not the same moment. *Chronos*.

For God, it must be different. Everything must be simultaneous in God's time. There can be no past from which God is absent, no future that fails to include God. God is the one who includes the cosmos; it cannot be the other way around. When we speak of God, we are dealing with something much more like a sphere than like a line. We stand in the center and find ourselves equidistant from every point on the surface. God is all around us. This is an existence which encompasses us but

which we cannot encompass, an existence we can never leave. The dominion of God is existence itself. Further, the dominion of God cannot be separated from the divine self—just as God cannot have the before-and-after limit of duration, so God cannot have the not-here-but-there limit of location. God can't live anywhere, so God must live everywhere. For God, matter and energy are, at bottom, different forms of the same thing or, as Einstein put it succinctly, $E = MC^2$. Energy is actually matter moving really fast! The creation is a burst of energy, which is ongoing. It becomes everything that is. There is nothing outside it.

Who are you? Moses wanted to know four thousand years ago, and we have been wrestling with this reasonable question ever since. For some of us, it has led to conundrum upon conundrum as we have created intricate structures of thought about God, edifices that soared far above the experiences of human life. But Moses doesn't ask a speculative question. Freeing the Hebrews from their enslavement will be a formidable task, and he wants to know who will undergird his response. Is he on his own, or does he have backup?

> Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I am who I am." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"[2]

The God of their fathers is one thing, a concrete memory—surely most of the Israelites to whom Moses must make his case will remember at least *some* of the stories about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Name, though, is something else entirely.

2 Exod 3:13–14.

I AM? What is that supposed to mean? *You want us to leave everything we know here to follow—what? A sentence fragment?* I am often tempted to see interpolation when Scripture doesn't make sense, the work of a later hand trying to make the record a little more plausible. I do think I see it here, especially when I consider the absurdly anthropomorphic God Moses encounters only ten verses later:

> At a lodging place on the way the Lord met him and sought to kill him.[3]

Good grief.

Some ancient writer may have been interested in deepening Moses's experience of God for us. His project has been successful—the God of the Exodus isn't just the folkloric partisan of the Israelites whom we meet in this story. God is existence itself. And, while the sophisticated *I AM* response to Moses may be a newer addition, it is far from modern. Somebody in very ancient times thought God was much more than a partisan deity who might lie in ambush to kill Moses. God was existence itself.

Theologians may ask speculative questions about God, but most people have more personal reasons for inquiring into the divine nature. Theology is interesting all the time, but it becomes urgent to us when loss threatens. How can we get free? What will the death I am facing mean? For that matter, what did my life mean? Will I ever see her again? Will I get a second chance? Does pain go on forever? It is these existential cries that rise heavenward. When we speak of such things as the elasticity of time, the identity between energy and matter, the absence of duration and location, are we speaking of anything that will make it more possible for us to live in peace of

3 Exod. 3:24.

spirit? Are these means by which the power that creates the universe can "incarnate" for us in a way that our minds can handle, enough for us to touch it just a bit? Or even just to *imagine* touching it? Or are these just interesting puzzlements, the parlor games of a religious temperament—literally, of no earthly good?

No. This is more than a game.

Our losses resound throughout our lives. They are the reason our exploration of time matters.