

Isaiah 6:1-13
Matthew 13:12-17

LAYERS

Life is a mystery. It has endless layers. I think everybody knows that – from time to time. We all know that our society has problems, but one of the truly marvelous things about our time and culture is the endless research – the endless searching for information and understanding. There is hardly any category or area of life we can imagine that does not have individuals, and even teams of people, spending time and life trying to become more knowledgeable in their area of interest.

The Internet has brought this all vividly to our attention. Some of us are so old we can remember having to plan periodic trips to a special library where we could do our research and study. The local library was nice, but seldom adequate in our field. It often took considerable effort to gain a permission slip or library card to a really good library. In those days I always carried a piece of paper in my pocket so I could write down the items I wanted to look up next time I got to the library. Otherwise I would forget some of them, and it might be weeks before I could get back again.

Today, at any time of the day or night, we can find whatever information we need or want – easier, faster, more complete. I get a phone call and learn that a friend of mine has been diagnosed with some disease I have never heard of. An hour after we hang up, I am a virtual expert on what my friend is facing. Someone left a wonderful book about Johannes Kepler on my desk just before I went on vacation this summer. I read it with avid interest, but some details fuzzed in my mind. The book was at a different location, but in two minutes I not only had the answer to my question, but I could have spent the rest of the day reading about Kepler on the Internet. That is the downside. If you get aimless or lose your focus, you can spend endless hours in a maze of fascinating facts, articles, opportunities, possibilities.

But I am obscuring my own point. The point is that everywhere we turn, life comes in layers. None of the information I find on the Internet – or anywhere else – is possible without the dedication and hard work of the many people who go digging for it, layer after layer. It is a staggering thing, when I step back to consider it. Along with all the foibles, faults, stupidity, and downright evil that go on in our world, there is also this

other side to us. A huge number of people do care, do contribute, do want to know, do even want to make a significant difference in some field or area of life that they feel especially drawn to, whether by luck, by design, or by accident. To no one's surprise, I see this as part of the Creator's intentional design. I believe that what we call "vocatio" is one of the deepest hungers and meanings in life.

The Buddha taught: "If you give a man a fish, you provide him one meal. If you teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime." There were more fish, and clearer waters, in 500 B.C. than there are today – and a lot fewer people in India. The precept still makes sense though. That is why we keep toying with the notion of changing our perspective about "missions" around here. If we help one person find their true vocatio, benefit and blessing will flow from them for the rest of their life here. But it's tough to design a mission with this purpose in mind. If you give a person a handout who already has a vocatio and you just happen to catch them in a down moment, it could have great benefit. But the chances of stumbling into such a combination are far less than our chances for winning the lottery.

Again I obscure my own point. (I do that a lot, don't I?) Life comes in endless layers. We have reason to be grateful and appreciative – both to our Creator and to all God's willing servants who live and work to make a contribution to life. Many of them devote themselves to knowing more – searching for more information – eager to discover more of the layers of whatever area of life has attracted them. This seems to me such a high calling, and such a sacred trust, that I have great scorn for those who obscure the truth on purpose. Those who hide the truth or twist it to their own ends are agents of Satan, the Father of Lies. There is no law against it, I guess because intention is nearly impossible to prove. But you would think it would be one of the high crimes, instead of something we just smile at. And we won't get into *The Da Vinci Code* or *Left Behind* or modern-day politics, or I really *will* sidetrack myself. So I won't mention them.

Have any of you ever heard of Immanuel Velikovsky? Forty years ago or so, he had a sizable cult of avid followers. My strong suspicion is that Velikovsky never intended to mislead anybody but was convinced that he had stumbled onto significant evidence that the solar system was formed in a way quite different from the way we were all being taught. So he spent his life in research and writing – that turned out to be wrong.

I wonder how he was greeted on the other side. I suspect our Lord gave him a hero's welcome. Yes, I know he was Jewish and I know he has been discredited. But it takes a lot of us seeking the truth – and exploring down wrong turns and blind alleys and dead ends – to keep us growing and learning. Velikovsky followed his light, and illuminated a dead end. Copernicus was wrong about a lot of things, but the road he illumined led on. Johannes Kepler took us farther down that road. Kepler *wanted* to be a Lutheran pastor. But life does not always open for us in the way we wish. So he ended up a famous mathematician – the Imperial Mathematician of the Holy Roman Empire, in fact.

Kepler was a breakthrough astronomer and, in his time, a renowned astrologer. In my opinion, he was one of the best theologians of the fifteenth century, and got excommunicated by the Lutheran church for it. I suspect nearly every one of you, if you knew the story, would side with Kepler against the church officials who threw him out of the church. By the way, Kepler remained a faithful Lutheran through it all, and to the day of his death. Figure that one out. He had a funny, quiet way of trusting the Creator, the harmony of the universe, the majesty of truth – and he knew that Jesus was bigger and would last longer than the chaos and foolishness of what was going on all around him. What was going on all around him was the Thirty Years War between Catholics and Protestants (part of the aftermath of the Reformation), and the witchcraft trial of his mother. Katharina was not condemned or burned, but the ordeal of prison and torture and trial killed her anyway. Kepler had the influence to save her, but local politicians “lost” his letters, delayed due process, and ignored procedure until it was too late. Some of them lost their posts eventually, but that did not do Katharina any good.

Life has endless layers. Life is always an unfolding mystery. Anybody who feels comfortable and satisfied and safe in the present moment has a life built on sand. Things are moving on. New layers are always being revealed. If you have no anchors in realms beyond this one, your life is like a leaf blowing in the storm. If today is calm and sunny, wait awhile.

I had a friend on Mercer Island who pretended to be the minister of the Methodist church there. Now, that isn't fair; he was a really good minister in many, many ways. But his real love was archaeology. Every summer would find him in Israel on a dig. Between summers, he spent

a good deal of time and thought getting ready for the coming summer and communicating with others involved in the dig. On many archaeological sites, there is an Israeli lead and an American lead, and my friend was the American lead on an important dig, so all his preparation was not surprising. In some ways, an archaeologist's whole life is about layers. At one level, the entire history and dynasty of King David would dance before his eyes. A few pottery shards and implements above that, and he was seeing the Divided Monarchy and wondering about Phoenician influence. There was a layer for Rome, and a Byzantine layer, and, if somebody dropped a candy-bar wrapper, a present-day layer. Now, my friend would be annoyed at me for oversimplifying, but you understand: It is possible to see all life on earth in terms of archaeological layers. The record is in the dirt, so to speak.

There are also layers of development in any other field. History usually thinks in terms of layers of time. "Between this date and that date, these things happened." William Shakespeare was born seven years before Johannes Kepler. Four years before Kepler died, the Dutch bought Manhattan for \$24. For some of us, the sequence of time comes in layers.

Art history looks at the development of art in layers of sequence – what developments in one period led to further developments, and then to further developments. Music has a layered history as well. Isaac Newton could not have achieved any of what he did had he not built off of Copernicus, Tycho Brahe, Galileo, Kepler. Religion has a layered history, though vast groups in our time want to pretend that nothing has ever changed – and that if it does, you are going straight to Hell. We always build, ignore, or destroy off of those who came before us. We can thank God or be frightened by it. We can thank God and try to be part of it.

Not to belabor the point – well, actually, to belabor the point: Relationships come in layers. Hopefully, at least, your relationship with God is the core of your life. Next comes your relationship with yourself. If that is reasonably healthy, you have a chance for some good relationships with others. But everybody in the world outside of you does not fit in the same category. It comes in layers. There is an inner circle of people who are incredibly important to you. It may even be a mystery to you how some of them got into that inner circle, but there they are. Some people may not be there who you think are supposed to be; if that happens, it can be very disconcerting.

There is another circle of people beyond the primary inner circle, and, without trying for precision, they mean a great deal to you. You care about them, even love them. But if you have to make choices about giving time, energy, or resources (and you have to make such choices constantly), the people in the inner circle always win out over people in the second circle. God wins out even over people in the inner circle. If you think it doesn't work this way, maybe you don't know who is in which circle in your own life. Naturally, we try to avoid situations in which we have to explain to people in circle two that they are not in circle one. We don't want to hurt anyone's feelings. It doesn't always occur to us that they have the same problem, and are very likely to understand. Maybe in the Kingdom of Heaven, we won't be so limited that we have to make such choices. On the other hand, where do you think we are? (One of the fun things about being a pastor is that most church members think they should be in your inner circle, but you are almost never in theirs. In this church, it sometimes seems almost the other way around, which is even more disconcerting.)

There is a third circle, where we have considerable interest in people and wish them well, for the most part. But they do not greatly or directly impact our lives or our choices on a personal level. If they start to, they shift into a different circle. There are more circles than I have named, including a vast throng of people about whom we are essentially neutral. We may have sympathy if they are hurt, but the relationship itself is distant and generic. Honest people realize that the circles or layers go on into the negative spectrum. And most of us put up serious shields and barriers to ensure that we do not consciously hurt or harm people in some of the circles at the other end of the spectrum.

It is, by the way, a difficult but revealing meditation to sit down with paper and pen and write the names of the people who fit into our meaningful, personal layers of relationship – both positive and negative. It brings a lot of clarity. It sometimes brings surprises. It often reveals some of the dynamics behind our choices, and it even helps us to pray more clearly and prioritize more effectively. But that is just a side comment.

This has been a long introduction, and I hope it has not annoyed you. In fact, I hope it has us all thinking about how life always comes in layers, because I want to talk a bit about layers of awareness. What is your impression of Isaiah and his vision of being in the heavenly temple?

“In the year that King Uzziah died” warns us that Judah is coming into a time of upheaval. Uzziah had taken the throne when he was sixteen years old. He was a very good king for many years, faithful to Yahweh and fighting off the enemies of his people. Edomites, Ammonites, Philistines, Meunites all learned that Judah was no longer “easy pickings.” With security and prosperity, as so often happens, there came a time of pride and spiritual carelessness. When the prophet Zechariah died, Uzziah seemed to lose his humility and his loyalty to God. He died a leper, and some thought it was God’s comment on the situation. In any case, Uzziah was king for fifty-two years. When leadership changes after that long a reign, upheaval is all but certain. So God is about to call a new prophet onto the scene – some say the greatest of all the prophets. Judah is going to need him!

That puts a clearer light on the verse. *“In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord.”* What do you think of Isaiah’s vision? I think if some of us had a vision like Isaiah’s, we would keep pretty quiet about it. While some might find it interesting, how could they gauge its importance or authenticity? Visions are not really real, are they? And if some would think our vision interesting but irrelevant, the vast majority would consider us kooks, wouldn’t they? “You really think you saw the eternal realms – like you were really there? And God actually told you that you should be his personal mouthpiece?”

Life has many layers. Isaiah thinks he really saw God in his holy temple. He thinks that in some mysterious way, God transported him into this experience to have this conversation, and to commission him to be God’s prophet – God’s mouthpiece. No question about it. And Isaiah’s life, from this experience on, would reflect that reality. Not at that moment, but because of the history about to unfold, a fair-minded, unprejudiced person would have to conclude that this vision was not only authentic, but represented a reality more real than any normal reality ever could be.

Life is made up of layers. Some of the layers are layers of awareness. People who have only one layer of awareness will always scoff and roll their eyes at people who have more than one layer of awareness. You must not let that surprise you or throw you off. Actually, you could scoff or roll your eyes all you want at Isaiah and it wouldn’t matter. His life had been changed and his feet were on a very different path. He had seen a destiny he had not seen before, and it was very unlikely

that anything in this world could turn him away from it. At least nothing in this world ever did.

Isaiah and God both know that most people will stay, if they can, with the one layer – the one dimension. It seems far safer that way. “*Go and say to this people, ‘Hear and hear, but do not understand; see and see, but do not perceive.’*” If they could hear – if they could see – beyond the one obvious layer they try to hang on to, they would turn to me and I could heal them. But they are determined to shut me out because they are too frightened to consider that life might be bigger than they think, more dimensional than they have known – full of mystery and possibilities far beyond anything they can know without my help.

So even though we have this marvelous array of people delving into endless dimensions of life, there is also the other familiar pattern among us: if it doesn’t fit into my little scheme of things – if it doesn’t match the conclusions I have already come to – then it is doubtless somebody’s imagination, or somebody’s error, or somebody’s desire to get a little extra attention for themselves.

In the face of spiritual awareness, a great many people simply write it off. If it is troublesome or disorienting, then it does not exist. Besides, if it is important, it should be obvious, don’t you think? If God wanted us to know, he would have made it plain. Why should we have to go digging for it? Why should we imagine that awareness comes on many different layers, just because all of the rest of life is built that way? “I’m sorry, but if it is not physical and cannot be proven physically, then it does not exist.” How naive! Do we imagine that God can come to us *without* being troubling and disorienting?!

Atheism and agnosticism, despite what some people try to claim, are not signs of a high IQ. The religious can easily match, and far overmatch, all claims to intelligence. Huge numbers of people who were both brilliant and highly educated were also humble, faithful believers. Some people hide from life in their work. Some hide from life in their pain or problems. Some hide from life in their excuses or in how hard their lives have been. Many people hide from life in an intellectual cocoon. We read and read and read, but never conclude. We think and doubt and pose questions, but never commit. We prefer theories to participation; we prefer honest intellectual debate to honest belief – or to any final allegiance. What if I make a decision and claim to believe something, and tomorrow a new fact comes to light? For some, that is a terrifying prospect.

And there is more than one version of it. What if tomorrow an even prettier woman comes along? What if tomorrow an even better job is offered? What if tomorrow ... And what if tomorrow we die, never having lived? As the billboard says, "If you think getting up on Sunday morning is hard – try rising from the dead."

Life is full of mystery, and there are endless dimensions. We live in a world where a large percentage of people do not want to see beyond the physical layers – they do not want to have any troublesome awareness of layers outside their comfort zone, especially not anything we might identify as *spiritual* awareness. Even many "very religious" people are determined to confine and explain everything about Christianity and the relationship between us and the divine. From their perspective, God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit must all be put into tiny boxes of biblical verses, creeds, and formulas. They say we must all stay inside the explanations and descriptions we have been handed by divinely inspired writers of ancient manuscripts. God revealed himself back then, but God never does that anymore – not in our time, and especially not to us – unless it is to remind us to believe what we have already been told.

And Jesus? Actually, Jesus had considerable scorn for the shallow people. He broke beyond every religious border His day and time had to offer. Why do you think we killed Him? In today's passage we find Him quoting Isaiah about the people who see without seeing and hear without hearing. They will not allow themselves to see or search beyond the borders of their safe and certain lives. *"This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand."*

Do you ever wonder, as I wonder, how painful it must have been for Jesus to know and see and be aware of so much beyond our sight – and be able to share so little of it, and with so very few? I doubt if very much of that pain has gone away for His Holy Spirit. Except I know some of it does – with some of you.

There are so many layers to life. Jesus died for us – but why? We have a Message to spread – but when, and how? We are invited into an Eternal Kingdom – but what difference does it make to the way we live now?

LAYERS

There are people who belong to churches, come to churches, even consider themselves pillars of the churches for many years – but having eyes they do not see and having ears they do not hear anything beyond the narrow borders of survival in this present realm and moment. It is a great sorrow. Please, do not be one of them.

Jesus is the Lord of endless layers, endless dimensions of Life – many of them incredibly beautiful. He is ever eager to show them to us just as soon as we are willing to clear our schedules enough to come with Him. We have tasted some of them, and caught glimpses of others. Let us continue to open the eyes and ears of our souls.