**Readings:**

*On the Beach Alone, at Night*, Walt Whitman

*As the old mother sways her to and fro singing her husky song,*

*As I watch the bright stars shining, I think a thought of the clef of the universes and of the future.*

*A vast similitude interlocks all,*

*All spheres, grown, ungrown, small, large, suns, moons, planets,*

*All distances of place however wide,*

*All distances of time, all inanimate forms,*

*All souls, all living bodies though they be ever so different, or in different worlds,*

*All gaseous, watery, vegetable, mineral processes, the fishes, the brutes,*

*All nations, colors, barbarisms, civilizations, languages,*

*All identities that have existed or may exist on this globe, or any globe,*

*All lives and deaths, all of the past, present, future,*

*This vast similitude spans them, and always has spann'd,*

*And shall forever span them and compactly hold and enclose them.*

*They’re Made Out of Meat*, by Terry Bisson, first published in *Omni* magazine in 1991.

***Reader 1****: They're made out of meat.*

***Reader 2****: Meat?*

***Reader 1****: Meat. They're made out of meat.*

***Reader 2****: Meat?*

***Reader 1****: There's no doubt about it. We picked up several from different parts of the planet, took them aboard our recon vessels, and probed them all the way through. They're completely meat.*

***Reader 2****: That's impossible. What about the radio signals? The messages to the stars?*

***Reader 1****: They use the radio waves to talk, but the signals don't come from them. The signals come from machines.*

***Reader 2****: So who made the machines? That's who we want to contact.*

***Reader 1****: They made the machines. That's what I'm trying to tell you. Meat made the machines.*

***Reader 2****: That's ridiculous. How can meat make a machine? You're asking me to believe in sentient meat.*

***Reader 1****: I'm not asking you, I'm telling you. These creatures are the only sentient race in that sector and they're made out of meat.*

***Reader 2****: Maybe they're like the orfolei. You know, a carbon-based intelligence that goes through a meat stage.*

***Reader 1****: Nope. They're born meat and they die meat. We studied them for several of their life spans, which didn't take long. Do you have any idea what's the life span of meat?*

***Reader 2****: Spare me. Okay, maybe they're only part meat. You know, like the weddilei. A meat head with an electron plasma brain inside.*

***Reader 1****: Nope. We thought of that, since they do have meat heads, like the weddilei. But I told you, we probed them. They're meat all the way through.*

***Reader 2****: No brain?*

***Reader 1****: Oh, there's a brain all right. It's just that the brain is made out of meat! That's what I've been trying to tell you.*

***Reader 2****: So ... what does the thinking?*

***Reader 1****: You're not understanding, are you? The brain does the thinking. The meat.*

***Reader 2****: Thinking meat! You're asking me to believe in thinking meat!*

***Reader 1****: Yes, thinking meat! Conscious meat! Loving meat. Dreaming meat. The meat is the whole deal! Are you beginning to get the picture or do I have to start all over?*

***Reader 2****: Omigod. You're serious then. They're made out of meat.*

***Reader 1****: Thank you. Finally. Yes. They are indeed made out of meat. And they've been trying to get in touch with us for almost a hundred of their years.*

***Reader 2****: Omigod. So what does this meat have in mind?*

***Reader 1****: First it wants to talk to us. Then I imagine it wants to explore the Universe, contact other sentiences, swap ideas and information. The usual.*

***Reader 2****: We're supposed to talk to meat.*

***Reader 1****: That's the idea. That's the message they're sending out by radio. 'Hello. Anyone out there. Anybody home.' That sort of thing.*

***Reader 2****: They actually do talk, then. They use words, ideas, concepts?*

***Reader 1****: Oh, yes. Except they do it with meat.*

***Reader 2****: I thought you just told me they used radio.*

***Reader 1****: They do, but what do you think is on the radio? Meat sounds. You know how when you slap or flap meat, it makes a noise? They talk by flapping their meat at each other. They can even sing by squirting air through their meat.*

***Reader 2****: Omigod. Singing meat. This is altogether too much. So what do you advise?*

***Reader 1****: Officially or unofficially?*

***Reader 2****: Both.*

***Reader 1****: Officially, we are required to contact, welcome and log in any and all sentient races or multibeings in this quadrant of the Universe, without prejudice, fear or favor. Unofficially, I advise that we erase the records and forget the whole thing.*

***Reader 2****: So we just pretend there's no one home in the Universe.*

***Reader 1****: That's it.*

***Reader 2****: Cruel. But you said it yourself, who wants to meet meat? And the ones who have been aboard our vessels, the ones you probed? You're sure they won't remember?*

***Reader 1****: They'll be considered crackpots if they do. We went into their heads and smoothed out their meat so that we're just a dream to them.*

***Reader 2****: A dream to meat! How strangely appropriate, that we should be meat's dream.*

***Reader 1****: And we marked the entire sector unoccupied.*

***Reader 2****: Good. Agreed, officially and unofficially. Case closed. Any others? Anyone interesting on that side of the galaxy?*

***Reader 1****: Yes, a rather shy but sweet hydrogen core cluster intelligence in a class nine star in G445 zone. Was in contact two galactic rotations ago, wants to be friendly again.*

***Reader 2****: They always come around.*

***Reader 1****: And why not? Imagine how unbearably, how unutterably cold the Universe would be if one were all alone.*

**Starry, Starry Night**

**Rev. David Kraemer**

**Part 1**

Some of you might remember, I offered these readings on one of the first Sundays I ever spoke in this church, a little over two years ago. I love them both, I especially like the juxtaposition of the two of them, the quiet introspection and celestial ideals of the Whitman reading and the bloody fun of the “Meat” reading.

They articulate for me that two-edged feeling of standing under the night sky, at once wholly minusculized by the immensity of the universe and at the same time filled with the sense of being alive. Cold and hot at the same time. Shivering and breathing. Humbled and empowered.

The “Meat” reading is maybe appropriate in this season as we celebrate the birth of Jesus. Whatever tradition you come from, whatever esteem you hold him in, whatever divine or prophetic or revolutionary qualities you ascribe to him, Jesus, in every understanding, was fully human. This is what incarnate means. In the flesh.

We don’t think of him that way much. For some people, it is the divinity of Christ that is most important, the belief that Christ and God and the Holy Spirit are all parts of the same mystical trinity, parts and whole at the same time.

Still others find an even more personal connection. Jesus speaks to some people. He is alive for them.

Maybe, in a way, Jesus is a bridge, the most accessible person of the trinity, who can help connect humans to a distant, more abstract, or severe God, Got the father, God the disciplinarian maybe, or God the all-powerful, at least.

For myself, I can say I think of Jesus mostly as a historical figure and a cultural edifice. As a man who brought great change to his own time and to times since. Jesus makes a difference because of the radical lessons he tried to teach his people, but also because of the many, many layers of meaning people have laid upon him.

Divinity, depending on your understanding, might come from the work of culture, or experience, or interpretation, or imagination, or someplace else entirely.

Put this in the context of the Meat reading and I suppose you could say that Jesus was Jesus for all intergalactic beings, too. But I think context is everything. Jesus might mean something to the captain and first mate of our imaginary alien spaceship, but only as they choose to make him so.

Jesus, in my understanding, and in every other understanding, was fully human. He might be fully divine, depending on what you mean by that word, but in any case, fully human.

Born, lived, died.

There are no exceptions to that trinity. No one escapes its rigid geometry. Even Jesus. Had he not been born, had he not lived, had he not died, his existence – whatever that would have been – would have been unknown us, a mere dream, to ones utterly alone in the universe.

**Part 2**

The beach poem takes me in a different direction.

The central theme here is the universal connection between everything. It is an expression of what we acknowledge in our seventh principle, the interconnectedness of all of existence, of which we are a part.

Whitman uses this word, “similitude,” which you don’t hear so much these days. It means “likeness,” or similarity. What he’s saying is that the same thing runs through all spheres, all universes, all identities that have existed or may exist on this globe, or any globe.

We are not so different. We are not set apart. We are set with. We would do well to remember this when we think of the various kinds of borders in our lives. The border between the U.S. and Mexico, to be sure, where we are doing to the least of these what we would not do to ourselves. You cannot worship the child in the manger and gas the one at the border, says the meme.

But there are all kinds of borders, fault lines, that run through us, separating one from the other. Shake us up just a little bit and they become chasms we cannot cross.

A similitude also is a parable, like the lessons of Jesus, an analogy, a story that makes a point. Like Jewish midrash, the point is open to interpretation, to discussion and evolution. As the story speaks to the context of our lives, it changes meaning as our lives change.

In this poem, before we get to the interconnectedness of the list of all things, who is the old mother? What is she doing there? Who is the speaker of this poem who sees her? And who is “her,” the baby, we suppose, being rocked to and fro?

She is there on the beach, alone, but not really, because the child is there, and we are, too, invited in by the voice of the poet. She, and we, are set on the edge of the ocean, the edge of eternity, maybe, or the edges of our own lives.

The old mother could be the ocean, life giving, life sustaining, rocking us to and fro. We might be the child. Or we were children once. Full of possibility.

And we are the voyeurs, the witnesses to this scene. We are there, but set apart. We have that sense of distance sometimes, between us and what is really going on.

There is music here, the husky song, “meat sounds,” but also the clef, French for key. There are rules in music, harmonies, mathematics. But also vibrations and sympathies and mystery.

This poem, you can learn, evolved for Whitman. An earlier, much longer version, held more questions than answers. It was maybe more “human” in that sense. The people on the beach were a father and daughter in the original version. As the gender changed, we can ask what Whitman was hoping to unlock.

This final version appears in the collection, “Leaves of Grass,” among a group of ocean poems that themselves serve as bridge between the earthy, working-class, common-as-mud first poems of the collection, and the more ethereal, metaphysical poems of the later pages.

So the poem itself spans that double feeling of being part of both the gritty world and the starry sky. We are both on the beach alone and part of the vast similitude.

Today we lit the Bethlehem candle, a spark that reminds us, maybe, of the star of the Bethlehem story. So I would offer one more interpretation, maybe the old woman is Mary, singing softly under a host of stars.

For me, the Christmas story is about love, and innocence, vulnerability, very human origins. This is how we all are. In the words of Pema Chodron from earlier, “we have to be brave enough to soften what is rigid in our hearts, to find the soft spot and stay with it.

Mary, as the mother of Christ, gives birth to every one of us. Every one of us contains within us the full potential promised of Christ. Whatever was holy in him is holy in you, too. Whatever was human in him is human in you, too. The Christmas story is the story of each one of us.

There is a *Sweet Honey in the Rock* song I like that goes “For each child that’s born, a morning star rises, and sings to the universe who we are.”

We are, infinitely small and infinitely connected. at once wholly minusculized by the immensity of the universe and at the same time filled with the sense of being alive. Cold and hot at the same time. Shivering and breathing. Humbled and empowered. Ruled by the same cycle of birth, life and death. And alive.

As the old mother sways her to and fro, singing her husky song, she sings to us all, under a blanket of stars.