

Sacred Ground
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United Church of Broomfield
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1 Thessalonians 5:12-21 (CEB)

¹² Brothers and sisters, we ask you to respect those who are working with you, leading you, and instructing you. ¹³ Think of them highly with love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. ¹⁴ Brothers and sisters, we urge you to warn those who are disorderly. Comfort the discouraged. Help the weak. Be patient with everyone. ¹⁵ Make sure no one repays a wrong with a wrong, but always pursue the good for each other and everyone else. ¹⁶ Rejoice always. ¹⁷ Pray continually. ¹⁸ Give thanks in every situation because this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. ¹⁹ Don't suppress the Spirit. ²⁰ Don't brush off Spirit-inspired messages, ²¹ but examine everything carefully and hang on to what is good.

Today is our final venture into the vast realms of outer space as part of our Trekking through the Bible series. Today we are considering an episode in the series Voyager, a show that aired from 1995 to 2001. Set in the 24th century, the Starfleet vessel USS Voyager leaves the space station, Deep Space Nine, on a mission to find a missing ship. While in a region of space known as The Badlands, Voyager is **enveloped** by a powerful energy wave that kills several of its crew and mysteriously transports it from the Alpha Quadrant to the Delta Quadrant, some 70,000 Light Years away – into space that truly no human has ever explored. Voyager is attempting to get back to the Alpha Quadrant and along the way, its crew does what Star Trek crews do – explore new worlds.

Let us begin with today's episode. Star date: 50063.2

The crew of the USS Voyager accepts an invitation from a humanoid race called the Nechani to take shore leave on their planet. To learn more about the Nechani culture, several of the crew members take a tour of some of the religious sites and caverns. Curious about a particular shrine, crew member Kes attempts to enter it and is knocked unconscious by a biogenic field at the entrance. Kes is transported to sickbay and fellow crew members demand to know more about the shrine; they want to analyze the field and gather information that may be able to revive Kes. However, the Nechani feel that Kes is being punished by the Ancestral Spirits for inappropriate behavior. They state that there is simply nothing that can be done.

On board Voyager, the Doctor stabilizes Kes and determines she's undergone severe neuroleptic shock and is in a kind of coma. He will need more information about what happened before he can treat her. Captain Kathryn Janeway tries to diplomatically talk to the Nechani Magistrate to gather information about the shrine, the energy field and the monks who enter it without harm, but the Magistrate says that he can't provide the scientific information that Janeway wants; the shrine is a natural phenomenon, the ancestral spirits do what they do and only the monks who have gone through "the ritual" have knowledge about it and they are sworn to secrecy.

Meanwhile, crew member Neelix discovers an ancient Nechani story about a king, Nevad, whose son made the same error as Kes: To save his son, this king requested to undergo the ritual that the monks endure in order to enter the shrine without harm. The king was successful, passed the ritual and was able to see his son awaken from his "death sleep." Having no other apparent options, Janeway decides to try this approach in order to

covertly gather scientific data about the shrine and hopefully save Kes. She tells the Magistrate what she's learned and insists that she wants to go through the same ritual. Her request is granted.

Ardent scientist that she is, Janeway expects that the ritual will involve some kind of physiological change as a result of some physical test of endurance; kind of like an indigenous Vision Quest. A guide meets Janeway at the entrance to the cave and leads her to a room full of elderly people who invite her to join them as they wait. When Janeway asks them how long they've waited, they squabble and bicker among themselves, and, oddly, reply that they have been waiting for as long as they can remember.

She grows impatient and tries to open the other door. The guide answers and allows her to leave. She expresses that she is eager to begin the challenges. Her guide informs her that everything she does during this ritual will be meaningless, and that the only thing that matters is finding her connection to the spirits. Janeway says that she is ready to go through each of the physical challenges imposed on her – believing them to be the key to a cure for Kes.

The guide first asks her to hold a rock and tell her what she sees: “A rock.” Janeway is next asked to finger-paint freely. Then she is asked to rock-climb, from which she becomes increasingly exhausted from the physical exertion. Finally, she is asked to place her hand inside a container that houses a hissing creature called a nesseset; it bites her, and she falls unconscious. Is she hallucinating? She keeps returning to each of the tasks. Can she trust what she sees and experiences? She awakens in a kind of hole that resembles a sarcophagus, and states, “I am dying.” The guide simply replies, “everyone dies eventually” before closing the lid to the tomb. Janeway then finds herself on a seashore, where her guide appears and ostensibly acts as the voice of the spirits, who tell her that her request to have them reawaken Kes is inconsequential as Janeway possesses all the information she needs to help Kes.

Janeway returns to Voyager confident that she got all she needs to help Kes. The Doctor states that the toxin from the nesseset's bite appears to have been the key, for it creates a biochemical immunity to the energy burst that hit Kes. He has a treatment prepared and begins to use it on Kes. Strangely, although the 'antidote' works and restores her biochemical levels to normal, Kes still doesn't wake up and the Doctor is forced to discontinue the treatment to avoid causing internal damage. It seems that Kes will still die. The Doctor tells Janeway that everything she went through was 'meaningless'.

Janeway returns to the planet to question her guide; after all, she did everything that the guide told her. ***But the guide tells her that she in fact didn't lead Janeway anywhere, for this was Janeway's ritual: she herself set these challenges, the guide simply fulfilled Janeway's expectations as Janeway would have settled for nothing else.*** Janeway admits that when she started the trial she had some preconceptions about what it would involve, but now she doesn't know what she is seeking or what to expect; however - still won't give up. It is then that the guide tells her that now she is finally ready to begin the ritual.

Janeway returns to the waiting room, where the elderly people greet her again. Now, however, Janeway asks more from these people about what she's supposed to accomplish in the room. They in turn derisively banter about her reliance on reason. They know that she is the kind of person who believes that she will eventually find the answers to Kes' situation with enough time, study and the right sort of tools. After all, that is what she believes as a scientist, even when her science fails right in front of her eyes. “If you can explain everything, what's left to believe in?” Janeway acknowledges that she is willing to try another path if science doesn't work, so they tell her to take Kes through the energy field again, to potentially kill her and herself. They can't tell her what it will do because, according to Voyager's scans, the biogenic field is lethal. They ask her, however, to let go of all her beliefs about the facts and simply trust the spirits to return her soul. If she believes she is ready, she is. But if she goes in with any doubt, with any hesitation, they will both be dead.

Janeway orders Kes be beamed back to the shrine. There, crew member Chakotay reiterates the uncertainties of what she intends to do and asks for more time for scans and research; he struggles with her plan and infers that he may relieve her of command, but she implores him that while she can't explain it, she now believes it. So, she carries Kes through the field, where a burst of energy hits them. They remain unharmed and Kes finally awakens.

Later, in sickbay, The Doctor goes into elaborate detail and gives a plausible scientific explanation for why taking Kes through the biogenic field again, combined with the ritual Janeway went through and the toxin released into her body saved Kes' life. Janeway – somewhat absentmindedly – nods and listens to The Doctor's explanation, stating that it is indeed very plausible and scientific. Yet she walks out of sickbay unsure of whether it was the science or her faith that was at work here.

Where do science and faith meet?
When do facts and spirituality collide?
Is it more important what one *knows* or what one *believes*?

Creation vs. Evolution debate -

Is all life as we know it really evolved over 13 billion years?
Were the universe and all forms of life created in literally six, twenty-four-hour days by a benevolent deity?
Or could it have been longer, and we need to consider that “LITERAL” definitions of the Bible may be inaccurate or too restrictive?

There are so many things on this planet that defy creation accounts – dinosaurs for instance. Dinosaurs don't easily fit into Biblical creation stories. Then, there are things that defy evolutionary, scientific explanations, such as the appendix – it serves no purpose, and no one can determine if it ever did. Then there's the Big Bang Theory (the scientific theory, not the television show). If the Big Bang was the beginning and it was a massive explosion of densely compacted matter, then where did “that matter” that exploded come from?

It's complicated. Why **must** creationism and evolution be contradictory? Why **must** it be either, or? Is it impossible, improbable, or sacrilegious to even think that maybe, *just maybe*, they can coincide, concur, support and agree, intentionally?

What compels a zealous scientist to seek logical, reasoned, empirical data incessantly until “THE ANSWER” is clear and indisputable? And nothing short of “THAT PROOF” is acceptable?

What allows a person, passionate in their faith, the freeing, relaxed, lazier-faire, kind of attitude toward some of the biggest questions of life and the universe? And they're ok embracing, “I don't know” as “THE ANSWER?”

As Christians, since when is our God so simple, so predictable and definable that we can discount the complexity of creation? Why do we think we have the right or even the power to affirm that God's creative power couldn't *possibly* be expressed through an evolutionary process?

From a secular humanist perspective, while I can appreciate the desire and comfort in having thoroughly examined facts, data and control, does embracing faith *alongside* science, really make a person weak, unenlightened and impractical?

It's these questions and many, many more that arise from this Star Trek, Voyager episode.

Captain Janeway is a mathematician and scientist, through and through, as is most of the crew of Voyager. That's why, when Kes is knocked unconscious by the shrine's energy field, the captain and crew immediately want to start analyzing the shrine, the energy field and Kes. They want to interrogate the monks to learn about the data regarding the physical aspects of the shrine. ---- They're met with religious pushback. It's challenging for them to entertain spiritual and meta-physical possibilities.

Conversely, when Kes is affected by the shrine's energy field, the Nachian Magistrate, a believer in the ancestral spirits and faith, immediately relegates Kes' situation as culminating in death. His belief and understanding of Nachian spirituality quickly led him to not consider or entertain non-religious possibilities to what has happened to Kes and what, if anything, can be done to treat her. ---- What happened is "the will of the ancient spirits;" why would you question ... God?

When Captain Janeway decides that she wants to undergo the Nachian Rituals, she approaches "the ritual" from the scientific perspective, telling the guide at the outset, "*I'm sure there is spiritual significance behind the challenges involved.*" But by the end of Janeway's first **and second** rituals, after Kes is healed, Janeway is at a different place. She allowed herself to be open to the **ideas and possibility of spirituality**. She has evolved.

For most of you who know me, I'm not the kind of person who is going to stand up here and try to convince you that you have to believe a certain thing or a certain way Or that you must make a decision on either creationism or evolution. I'm not saying that Captain Janeway's "evolution" is right or wrong or that with time *all scientists will evolve or all faithful will be enlightened*.

I think that the issue is far too complex for me to simplify it in such a way. And I'm not qualified or smart enough to do that. And I also think that God (at least "my" God) is too big for such a thing. What I ask is that wherever you may currently land on the questions regarding science and faith and where they intersect...allow yourself the "permission to take a fresh look at how God's Word and God's world can be understood together."¹

Albert Einstein, one the greatest and most influential physicists of all time and a self-described "agnostic," said, "Try and penetrate with our limited means the secrets of nature and you will find that, behind all the discernible [series of interconnected things or events], there remains something subtle, intangible and inexplicable. Veneration for this force beyond anything that we can comprehend is my religion. To that extent I am, in point of fact, religious." "The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existence. One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery each day."²

Science demands explanation and religion tolerates mystery – both require continual questioning and discovery and that's where I think science and religion meet.

¹ <https://biologos.org/articles/famous-christians-who-believed-evolution-is-compatible-with-christian-faith>

² <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0010027720302171>

In 2020, scientists conducted a study that investigated the role of questioning and mystery across the domains of science and religion. They asked about the need for explanations versus the acceptance of something as a mystery or inexplicable. In general, they learned that when it pertained to more scientific questions like “why is the center of the earth so hot,” explanations were more strongly needed as opposed to religious questions like, “why did God create the world,” which allowed more “mysterious” answers.³ Basically, at the end of that extremely long research paper, one of the results was that curiosity and the desire to seek answers, whether from a scientific or religious framework, were positive. The “need to know” comes from a sincere desire with anticipation to learn something new and valuable. Whether there was a factual answer or an acceptance that the answer was, “a mystery,” seeking more information, explanations, and answers is natural and good.

The first letter to the Thessalonians was a letter of encouragement, giving them hope during times of struggle and persecution as new believers in Christ. It was written two millennia ago, in a completely different era and context, in which the ideas of evolution and debates about nature and science were certainly not what they are today. This passage is at the end of the letter and it stresses that above all else, regardless of what the situation may be, whatever the topic or debate, the way of Christ teaches us to respond in love, grace and generosity.

Respect and appreciate those who are working with you, those willing to be in dialogue...

Live in peace with each other...

Be patient with everyone...

Don't suppress the spirit, the mysterious or the inexplicable...

Don't dismiss spirit-inspired messages, gut-feelings, or your experiences...

Test and examine everything...

If it's good, – hold onto it.

In the end, Kes is alive, so does it really matter how it happened? MUST we have a scientific, factual, analytical answer versus one shroud in mystery?

In the end, peace and growth in humanity comes from being comfortable with not knowing, but knowing to never stop asking questions.

Amen

³ ibid