

The X-Files and X-mas: The Truth Is Out There

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on December 24, 1998.
Scripture lesson: Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN

The *X-Files* is Fox network's most popular TV program. 20 million viewers watch every Sunday evening. The most watched show for people between the ages of 18 and 49. How many have seen *The X-Files*? How many like it? The story's about an FBI agent, Fox Mulder, a brilliant Oxford trained psychologist. One of the FBI's best and brightest. But he's also different. He's weird. Spooky. He believes in UFOs. The FBI ^{see} see him as a loose cannon. They've given him the X-files which are too weird to be taken seriously. Another thing about Mulder. You won't find Mulder in church most Sundays. He's totally unchurched. You might see him, though, on Christmas Eve. He may even be here tonight because Mulder is open to spiritual reality. He's like the shepherds in the Christmas story. Unchurched! Their work prevented them from going to religious services. Worked seven days a week, day and night. Completely unchurched. But the shepherds were open to events that defy rational explanation. So, having been terrified by heavenly messengers, they came with haste to the first Christmas Eve service and found Jesus. Afterwards "they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed." Both Mulder and the shepherds discover that the world is strange and more mysterious than most people think. What is real can't be programmed, categorized or easily referenced. Science can't explain everything. There's a supernatural dimension to the cosmos. Mulder and the shepherds are unchurched but they're believers. Mulder's creed is: "The truth is out there." Mulder believes in Truth with a capital T.

A lot of unchurched people believe the truth is out there. They're searching for it. They're passionate about finding it. Many unchurched people are on a spiritual quest even when they don't know what they're looking for. But they're convinced that the truth is out there and they're searching for it with or without the church.

Now, look at Mulder's partner, Dana Scully. Scully is Mulder's polar opposite. She's a skeptic. She's always looking for scientific, rational explanations when weird things happen.

Furthermore, Skully, is a Christian. Baptized! A communicant member although she doesn't attend very often. She wears a cross. But she's skeptical of anything she can't see and measure and understand. Skully is a lot like many of us well educated, main-line Protestants. We're skeptical about the truth. We wonder if the truth really is out there.

Ironic? Unchurched people believe the truth is out there. Well educated Christians in main-line churches aren't sure about the truth. We main line Protestants have spent a good part of the 20th century playing down truth claims. Explaining away miracles. Rationalizing, categorizing the mysterious ways of God. Many in the church are skeptics about the truth. Some Christian scholars write books that question if there really is truth with a capital T. On the other hand, unchurched secular scientists write books that claim there's an unexplained, cohesive force that unifies reality in ways human reason cannot comprehend. Despite the skepticism of main-line Protestantism, many unchurched people *know* the truth is out there. They want to find the truth.

What kind of truth *is* out there? For one thing there's the truth about ourselves. We need a savior. The twentieth century began with so much hope. Technology. Science. Medicine. We were going to save ourselves. We believed in the myth of inevitable progress. We were going to bring in a classless society. Our dreams turned into nightmares named the Gulag Archipelago, Buchenwald, a mushroom shaped cloud hovering over Hiroshima and the killing fields of Cambodia, Rwanda, and Bosnia. At the end of the century some of us realize that, although self-reliance is a great thing, we can't pull ourselves up by the boot-straps. The world can't pull itself up by its bootstraps. We can't save ourselves. The world raises questions that it can't answer. Reality is far more strange and weird than we thought. Problems far more complex. Truth is we need a savior. Someone from *outside* the world, *beyond* the world to save us.

Second, truth comes in the form of a person. Truth isn't simply an idea. A concept. A theory. That's what so much of main-line Protestantism has made of truth in the twentieth century. But we can't discover the truth just by thinking. Thinking is important. But truth is

more than an abstract idea. Truth is a person. Truth is One who loves us enough to risk and die on our behalf. God has refused to remain a cerebral, abstract idea. The Truth is out there and the Truth is God has come to us in the person of Jesus.

Third, truth is transcendent. Truth puts us in contact with something bigger than ourselves, surpassing our own thoughts, surpassing our own experience. Truth is stranger and less predictable than we used to think. Never limit truth to what you can experience or understand! The truth is out there and it's a transcendent truth. The shepherds went with haste looking for the Truth. They found the truth. They found a child named *Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*.

The letter *X* is the 24th letter of our alphabet. In science and math *X* stands for an unknown quantity. *The X-Files* celebrates the unknown dimension of reality. In the early Church the Greek letter *X* referred to Jesus Christ. Christians believe that God has become known in Jesus Christ, truly God, truly human.

There's a poster hanging in Mulder's apartment, "I Want to Believe!" A lot of people want to believe. We doubt but we want to believe. In one episode of *The X-Files* Scully is baffled by an event that defies her reason. She can't explain or understand. In her desperation she goes to church. She talks with her priest. She says, "What if God is speaking to us, and no one is listening?" Tonight, God is speaking to you. Are you listening? Speaking to you as the angels spoke to the shepherds. To you is born a Savior. Don't try "to program, categorize, or easily reference" the Christmas story. Faith seeks understanding. Faith values reason. Faith is not an irrational leap. But faith has an element of mystery. Faith doesn't by-pass or trash reason. But some things defy reason. Faith goes beyond reason. Faith takes us places reason can't. Seek the truth. The Truth is out there. Seek the Truth in Jesus Christ. Pray! "Lead me to the Truth. Show me the Truth. Enable me to do the Truth."

Let us pray: Good and gracious God, on this holy night you gave us your Son, the Lord of the universe, wrapped in swaddling clothes, the Savior of all, lying in a manger. On this holy night draw us into the mystery of your love. Join our voices with the heavenly host that we may sing your glory on high. Give us a place among the shepherds that we may find the one for whom we have waited, Jesus Christ, the Messiah and Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.