

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost – July 17, 2022

Colossians 1:15-28

¹⁵[Christ Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation;¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

²¹And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²²he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him—²³provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.

²⁴I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. ²⁵I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, ²⁶the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. ²⁷To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. ²⁸It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

**Images of the Universe like we have never seen before
circulated earlier this week.**

**This, I suppose rather appropriately given the subject of
the prompt, sent me down all kinds of wormholes.**

**I'm grateful the first look I got at these pictures from the
James Webb Space Telescope came from posts by clergy
friends on social media. That meant they usually came with**

some more profound reflection than my initial, instinctive, “Oh, wow, a whole bunch of galaxies together look like colorful little jelly beans!”

A little deeper dive took me to the Substack article written by The Reverend Nadia Bolz-Weber, the ELCA pastor of public witness in the Rocky Mountain Synod. Pastor Nadia named what these kind of cosmic revelations have stirred up in her throughout her life and what they have also stirred up in me. A cosmic anxiety disorder. These illustrations of the incomprehensible vast enormity of the Universe have a way of inspiring awe and existential dread. An increasingly sharp picture of just how tiny and isolated and insignificant we are on a rock hurtling through space, no not a rock, a pebble, no not a pebble, a grain of sand. Beautiful, absolutely... but I can only look and contemplate for so long and then my brain just can't process it anymore.

We try to scale these things in terms of what we know on out little sand grain. For instance, NASA scientists explained that the first image is of a galactic cluster (with a dull name that does it no justice, SMACS 0723). It's the one on the cover of this morning's bulletin. It came from this telescope a million miles away focusing for hours at a section of sky the size of ... a grain of sand held at arm's length.

Another image showed us part of the Carina Nebula we call the "Cosmic Cliffs." Because cliffs on this earth are something we know and easily comprehend. Enjoy the view and don't fall, jump or drive off. Pretty basic stuff. We can relate to cliffs. They're all around us.

The astronomer Claudio Melo explains that each of these uh, well what I'll just keep sticking with as jelly beans, has 10 billion stars, more or less. The scales of this stuff just boggle the mind.

Both in scaling up and in scaling down. The text from the letter to the Colossians I read this morning makes this bold claim about a God who is bigger than all this universe, that we understand now is so big that if the Jelly Belly Factory were pumping out galaxies instead of bright sugary candies, they could never keep up. Oh, and by the way, a man who probably stood not much more than 5 feet tall and lived 2,000 years ago in a desert full of sand is responsible for this creation what we can now tell was roughly 13 billion years ago.

I used to see images like these and wonder how can I still have faith when I can't make sense of all this and reconcile one thing to another in a logical fashion. But as Pastor Nadia wrote, "It used to give me anxiety, now I think it gives me ... hope."

She adds, and I'll paraphrase a little here and there for our more all-ages audience: "When my ego wants once again

to seek attention or take umbrage at slights or know itself only in comparison to others, I think I may try and undertake the practice of pulling up the latest images from the Webb telescope. Feel free to join me in this. Perhaps then I will remember that most of the (stuff) I get wound up about just doesn't matter. The cosmos is unbelievably big and yet here we are breathing our delicious gaseous oxygen and moving these glorious bodies and getting to have perfect dogs and eat pretty good pizza and love each other and also, by the way - the trees in my neighborhood are totally showing off right now and cherries are in season. I mean, why in *the world* would I spend any time whatsoever getting angry in traffic or holding onto some B.S. grudge about something the other person has for sure forgotten about years ago?"

Pastor Nadia makes some very good points and for good measure, I'm going to continue to borrow shamelessly from colleagues in pondering this. Pastor Katie Hines-Shah

at Redeemer Lutheran in Hinsdale, Illinois, observed that the first six verses of this passage in Colossians is most likely a verbatim quote of an first-century Christian hymn. This tells me, first off, that if the author of Colossians can borrow generously without attribution, I'm a step ahead of the game if I do so, *with* citations giving credit where credit is due.

Pastor Katie calls Jesus “our telescope, giving our weak eyes access to galaxies unnumbered and beauty beyond our ability to see. Jesus’ life, ministry, death, and resurrection are the lens by which we can peer into the heart of God to see a goodness larger and more limitless than we would ever perceive on our own.

We have such hope.

As great as the stars revealed by James Webb may be, the love of God is greater. The measure of grace stretches beyond the limits of light and time. The witness of the Bible, of hymn and theology and the lives of faithful believers – as

many as grains of sand on the earth and stars in the sky, are each a mirror, a lens, which together (make) clearer the grand truth of God's goodness."

This fresh observation resonates with me because, like the James Webb amplifying the work of the Hubble telescope before it, it takes me further back down the wormhole to a sermon by Pastor Jim Lindus, a mentor to me who served as Vanessa's pastor from the age of 7 and is still serving Trinity Lutheran in South Whidbey to this day.

Pastor Jim related easily 20 years ago now as I sat in a pew at Trinity one of the first times I ever visited post-high school graduation that he'd been pressed on the golf course for an answer to the question, "Pastor, I know what church doctrine says, but what do you believe?"

The part of Pastor Jim's answer that stuck with me all these years, that made me feel like there's a place for people like me in God's church, that I don't have to have all the

answers to be in awe of, and to love God, it was this. That the Scripture and all the experience of our lives are like a lens into the night sky about on par with a human being's naked eye. We see dimly and fuzzily. There's a whole lot that we simply do not know.

It's that kind of perspective that helps me in puzzling over a verse like "I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church." Like wait, Paul can't be saying that he's doing the work Jesus wasn't capable of doing, cuz that sounds an awful like what he's doing here.

New Testament authors can be as clumsy with their words as anybody else. I've wished they'd sometimes had more ruthless editors for a long time. I believe these words are divinely inspired but also that their writers often didn't know they were going to be preserved for so long and

applied to circumstances they could never fathom. To be generous to Paul, what is probably intended here is that he is glad to be able to take on the role of a servant doing God's will through the vessel of the Church, sharing the Good News and leading people like the good folk of Colossae to deeper faith, that whatever violence and imprisonment he has suffered is worth it if it permits this work to be done.

The mystery that has been hidden through the ages and generations has now been revealed to God's saints. It has also in Paul's generation been revealed. And it will also be revealed to generations who come long after we have gone. Bigger, better telescopes will likely render the James Webb obsolete and more will be added to humankind's knowledge of the physical Universe. But only unto God will all things ever be visible and only in God will all things be held together. Thanks for borrowing the words of song, Paul. Sometimes they say it better than you or I can.

And for that, thanks be to God. Amen.