



A Better Country

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40

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If you haven't heard yet, the James Webb Space Telescope (JWST) is the largest telescope ever sent into space. Thanks to the JWST, "[w]e are time traveling to the dawn of existence itself, seeing the universe as it was long before even the earliest life forms were here...The JWST was made real by the work of more than 20,000 people over two decades, standing on the shoulders of many who came before...The JWST is an international scientific mission (NASA, the Canadian Space Agency, and the European Space Agency) with no overt motive other than the reward of wisdom. It only transports humans metaphorically; we are not central to its findings. Its purpose is to enlighten, to enhance our knowledge, to shine a spotlight on the deepest recesses and corners of solar systems, to allow us to study planets and the climates of galaxies unknown to us — not to validate our own greatness, but rather to revel in what is beyond us. To convey to us the vastness of time and space, and, in turn, to impress upon humanity how very small our place is within it. To keep us humble, and in awe."¹

It is thrilling to be able to explore this far out in space and this far back in time. What we see now through the spectacular pictures we are getting from the telescope was in existence billions of years ago: the bright lights we see now took billions of years to reach us.²

Pictured before our very eyes we can witness the formation of the universe. Our heart might race as we might find ourselves getting closer and closer to the dawn of the universe almost expecting to see the hand of God in the act of creating. And then, we hear our physics professors of long ago reminding us of the Law of Conservation of Mass (matter is neither created nor destroyed) and the Law of Conservation of Energy (energy is neither created nor destroyed.) Then, Albert Einstein comes along and puts the two laws together to say that the total amount of mass and energy in the universe is constant.³

So, if matter and energy is constantly re-shaping and re-organizing itself, they have always been there all along. A few questions: Is there any need for God? Is there any conflict between theology and science? Does it need to be an either/or proposition?

We need not be intimidated by science and abandon faith. Some scientists do regard religion as pure fabrication, a waste of time, or even a distracting delusion and they see science as rational, objective, verifiable, and quantifiable. They view religion as a threat to the advancement of

¹ [The James Webb Space Telescope is giving humanity what we need right now \(msn.com\)](https://www.msn.com)

² [A cosmic time machine: How the James Webb Space Telescope lets us see the first galaxies in the universe \(msn.com\)](https://www.msn.com); and [James Webb Space Telescope surprises scientists; fulfills task it isn't designed for \(republicworld.com\)](https://www.republicworld.com)

³ [Law of Conservation of Mass Energy \(chemteam.info\)](https://www.chemteam.info)

science. They are not alone in thinking that religious zeal of any color is capable of pushing the world back to the dark ages.⁴

But we need to remember that the giants who established modern science were deeply religious people. They didn't see any conflict between science and religion. On the contrary: they thought that by doing science, they were discovering God's design and revealing it to humankind.

Albert Einstein, one of the greatest 20th century scientists exclaimed: "The most important function of art and science is to awaken the cosmic religious feeling and keep it alive."

The ELCA teaches that "There is no inherent conflict between scientific findings and the understanding of God as creator, redeemer and sanctifier."⁵ Why? Because we see God in all things, as St. Paul teaches,⁶ and the psalmist questions:

7 Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? 8 If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. 9 If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, 10 even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. 11 If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me," 12 even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you. (Psalm 139)

After all, in his discourse to the Greeks in the Athenian Areopagus, Paul affirmed that "In him we live and move and have our being."⁷

Mystics of all times have also come to the same conclusion:

Celtic theologian John Scotus Erigena (810-877), writing in the ninth century, says:

God is both above everything and in everything, since he, who alone truly is, is the Essence of everything and although he is whole in everything, he does not cease being whole outside of everything: whole in the world, whole around the world, whole in sensible creation; whole he makes the universe, whole he is made in the universe, whole in the whole of the universe; whole in its parts.⁸

The day of my spiritual awakening was the day I saw—and knew I saw—all things in God and God in all things. (Mechtild of Magdeburg, c. 1207 – c. 1282/1294)

God created all things in such a way that they are not outside himself... Rather, all creatures flow outward, but nonetheless remain within God. (Meister Eckhart, c. 1260 – c. 1328)

And finally, Julian of Norwich (1343 – ca. 1416), paraphrasing John⁹ says: "We are in God and God whom we do not see is in us."

Before anything ever existed, faith tells us, God is. We hear today one of the many biblical passages affirming God's authorship of life: "By faith we understand that the worlds were

⁴ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/do-science-and-religion-c_b_9829960

⁵ [Genetics Social Statement.indd \(elca.org\)](#)

⁶ Ephesians 4:6; see also Colossians 3:11.

⁷ See the whole passage Acts 17:22-28.

⁸ <https://dailymeditationswithmatthewfox.org/2021/06/24/celtic-spirituality-and-the-ground-of-being/>

⁹ 1 Jn 4:16

prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.”
(Hebrews 11:3)

For the very purpose of guiding us to see, approach, and embrace life in God, “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”¹⁰ In fact, “in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.”¹¹

People living by faith. What does it look like?

When I was younger, I thought that faith was to believe a set of doctrines about God and the Church. It was mostly intellectual assent. I was taught the catechism: the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, the Sacraments. I learned about Jesus and how he went about doing well for the people, healing and teaching. But he was mostly a character out of a book, one who lived long time ago.

With time, my understanding of faith has changed not because I cannot agree with the Church’s theological statements but because I needed a more personal engagement with God: I needed to move from my head to my heart.

I’ve learned to trust God in happy moments and in challenging moments. I have trusted God’s faithfulness not only when I could say, “All is well with my soul” but also when I found myself at the bottom of the pit, even when I could not sense his presence, even when the answer to my prayers was delayed. Our God is a God of life and God enjoys bringing about new things, new possibilities and realities.

I’ve also known the opposite of faith. I’ve known resignation and discouragement, apathy and cynicism. I have felt the weight of loneliness and the frightening distance of God. I have met dry spells in prayer and wondered about the silence of God.

But God has remained a faithful Companion to me. God is indeed the Emmanuel, God-with-us, Savior and Prince of Peace.

Faith, then, is a way of relating to God and to life. It isn’t what I do for the purpose of securing a spot in heaven. It’s what I do to live heaven now. It’s the assurance that the love and life I share with my neighbor now does make a difference and brings about the kingdom. It’s the joy and peace of a deeper union with God’s creation. It’s a deeper commitment to participate in God’s plan for the world.

We know that “faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.”¹² Therefore, if we want to hear the message and allow it to bear fruit that last,¹³ we may want to create the conditions to receive that message.

(AWAIT) We bend our knee at the altar of the Word of Life (in other words, we sit at the feet of Jesus like Mary did in Luke 10:39, taking in every word of the master) and rest in his presence.

(ALLOW) We open the doors of our heart and conscience and let his voice sooth our every fear and anxiety.

¹⁰ John 1:14

¹¹ Colossians 2:9

¹² Romans 10:17

¹³ Colossians 1:5.10; John 15:8; Ezekiel 17:23; Isaiah 55:11

(ACCEPT) We receive with humility his teaching to calm all our resistance, to expand our heart with the barrier-breaking vision of the kingdom of God and be renewed to life.

(ATTEND) Might our faith inspire us to go beyond ourselves, beyond our likes and dislikes, beyond our fears, our prejudices, beyond our thoughts and worldviews, beyond religion and (dogmatic) beliefs, beyond tribal association, party lines, and personal loyalties, ...

... and worship and serve the “God who so loved the world” to become one of us, the last and the least of us, the working poor, the food insecure, the (war, crime, climate) refugee, the overworked multiple-jobs single mother, the homeless war veteran, and the ten-year-old sexually abused girl?

We see, we listen, we obey. We don’t just hear what he has to say, we are doers of the word; we don’t just keep the faith, we practice it.

If we look at each individual mentioned above (the poor, the hungry, the refugee...), we may not know what to do and get discouraged. We may not find the strength or the will to help especially in a post-covid (can I say that?) era where we find ourselves depleted and compassion fatigued. The task at hand seems overwhelming, too huge to tackle. On top of all that, society is so divided it’s hard to know where to start and if we do start wanting to make a difference, are we getting ourselves in more interpersonal conflicts?

Is the Kingdom truly obtainable? Is Christianity a utopia? With so many retreating into opposing camps, are we too naïve to even wish to remain engaged?

Jesus’ own life has witnessed this to us: the path is narrow and the going rough. The end of the road for a Christian is Golgotha. Loneliness and rejection, infights and obstacles can be weary. Jesus asks: “What do you expect? The world has treated me this way and you are no greater than your master.” But rejoice and be glad for blessed indeed are the merciful, those who hunger and thirst for justice, and the laborers of peace: those are the ones in whom I find delight. Indeed, “Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them.” (Lk 12:37)

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. (Heb 11:1-2) Just like our ancestors, we don’t see where we are going but we trust the vision verbalized (that is, put into words) by God. Every time God spoke, it came to be. God’s Word is a creative Word, a Word of Life.

So, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” (Lk 12:32)

We, the little flock, have the kingdom promised to us by the Father Himself. When I trust God and keep on giving even as my mind says: “Enough!”; when my eyes fill with tears when I see people escaping their countries in fear and refuse to numb my emotions; when I keep loving even though I have known rejection; when I stay engaged, when all I want to do is write people off, God’s kingdom is at hand.

Today, we are invited into the future we long for at the deepest level of our being. We will get there only by leaving behind our fears and pessimism. Donating our riches, venturing beyond our normal surroundings, treasuring our connections with all God's people, watching for God to show up unpredictably and in unfamiliar disguise — those are all steps that make it possible.

So, as we participate continue our service, let our celebration launch us into the venture of faith that transforms possibilities into reality; let us ask God's blessing on our country and on our world that God's will be done, and God's kingdom come. Amen.