

“Opened Eyes, Filled Bellies, and Feet that Follow”
Easter 3C (May 5, 2019)
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>>Open our eyes that we might see wondrous things in your word, Amen.<<

On Thursday, Ashley Strickland of CNN published an online article about the Hubble Space Telescope.¹ The article included a series of images, one of which is called the Hubble Legacy Field. At first glance, the image looks like any old image we might carry in our minds of a clear night sky: empty blackness pierced by the scattered lights of stars. It’s an image that reminds me of the winter night skies in bitterly cold Northfield, MN, when I was teaching at St. Olaf College. I remember one time attending a “telescope night” at the local high school. I don’t remember the which month it was, but it was cold. Of course, fall, winter, and spring in Northfield are really early winter, winter, and late winter (not so different from Ithaca). Some of the coldest days and nights are the clearest ones. And, on telescope night, we drove to a nearby field where the light pollution was minimal and where two telescopes had been set up by someone from the Goodsell Observatory at Carleton College. We were hunting for planets amid the sea of stars above with a few constellation charts as our guide. It was pretty cool to see Jupiter through the telescope; cooler still to see Saturn’s rings. And...interesting to spot constellations, like, say, Ursa Major - “the Great Bear” constellation, anchored in the sky by the Big Dipper - one of those constellations that ancients like Claudius Ptolemy in the 2nd century raved about, and one we moderns might look at and wonder, “that’s supposed to be a bear?” “Okay.” Yes, Jupiter is cool, and Saturn is cool, and Ursa Major is cool, but my jaw drops when I look up on a clear night with the naked eye. It’s like a painting - a masterpiece of art - that envelops you. Looking up on a clear night, as Carl Sagan once put it, engages the “religious sensibility,” the “sense of awe.” And it’s humbling - humbling to realize that the years of our lives are, as the old King James Bible says, “threescore and ten, or by reason of strength fourscore.” 70 years or 80 years - a large handful or so of decades - while the lifecycle of stars, depending on their mass (the very stars we see when we look up) is measured in the hundreds of millions or even billions of years. We humans are small and our lives are short; and we’re not the center of the universe - as the astronomer Galileo pointed out before being forced to recant by the Church Inquisition in 1633 CE.

Which brings me back to Ashley Strickland’s piece on the CNN website. The Hubble Legacy Field image, she writes, “looks like [a typical] starry night ... vast darkness pitted by little points of light.” But the bright lights in the image, she says, “aren’t stars; they’re entire galaxies.” Strickland continues: “The image is a mosaic that combines 7,500 images from 16 years worth of the Hubble Space Telescope’s deep surveys, and looks back over 13.3 billion years of our universe’s history. [The image is made up of] 265,000 individual galaxies that extend all the way back to just 500 million years after the Big Bang, when the universe was still young and Earth wasn’t even a planet.” Pieter van Dokkum of Yale University calls the Hubble Legacy Field a “history book of the universe in one image.” The image, writes Strickland, “is the most complete portrait of the universe to date.” It is, says Garth Illingworth of the University of California at Santa Cruz, a “full history of the growth of galaxies in the universe” in a single image - a snapshot of galactic evolution over the aeons of cosmic time - millions and billions of years.

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https://www.cnn.com/2019/05/02/world/hubble-history-book-universe-photo-scni/index.html?utm_source=twCNN&utm_term=link&utm_medium=social&utm_content=2019-05-03T10%3A40%3A14

The Bible is packed with majestic language about the size of the cosmos, and the size and eternity of God as compared with the smallness and boundedness of humans. “A thousand years in your sight,” writes one Psalmist of God, “are like yesterday when it is past.” “With God,” says the writer of the New Testament letter of Second Peter, “one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.” St. Paul interjected a doxology in his letter to the Romans after probing God’s mysteries: “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!,” wrote Paul. “How unsearchable are [God’s] decisions and how inscrutable [God’s] ways!” “Who has known the mind of the Lord?” And one of the Psalmists sang, perhaps after looking up on a clear night: “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?”

If we place today’s scripture readings alongside this exalted language, this language of majesty, and if we read today’s texts with pictures in our minds of a clear and fathomless night sky dotted with countless stars and galaxies, I think we find a paradox. The cosmos is so huge; and we’re so tiny; and yet, both of today’s stories speak powerfully about how much individual human beings matter to the God whom scripture describes in places as majestic and exalted and wholly other.

Take for example the story of Peter and Jesus at the end of John’s gospel. As John tells the story, the post-Easter Jesus showed up on a beach to meet his disciples. There were seven disciples gathered, writes John, including Peter and the Thomas, known in Christian history as “the Doubter.” They all seemed bored until Peter stood up and said, “I’m going fishing.” The others went with him, but after a night at sea, they’d caught nothing. As they headed back to shore, Jesus was on the beach masked as a stranger; and he shouted to the disciples to drop their nets on the right side of the boat where, he said, they’d find some fish. John the storyteller doesn’t explain why the disciples, no doubt weary from a night of fishing, followed this advice from some stranger shouting orders from the beach, but they did and hauled in 153 large fish. Why the number is so precise - exactly 153 - has led to all sorts of inventive numerologies among interpreters, but no one really knows. I guess the disciples counted the fish, and that’s the number they caught. But it’s after this successful haul that they realize the stranger on the beach is Jesus. And in one of the New Testament’s funnier moments, Peter in the boat, seeing that it’s Jesus on the beach, puts *on* his clothes before jumping into the water to swim ashore; and when he and the rest gather on the beach, they discover that Jesus has already cooked breakfast - fish and bread over a charcoal fire. While lecturing on this chapter, one of my seminary professors asked an elephant-in-the-room question: where did Jesus get the fish? Maybe, suggested my professor, he just whistled and they jumped ashore.

But the 153 fish, Peter putting *on* his clothes before swimming ashore, and the question about where Jesus got the fish - these aren’t the point of this story. All of this is John’s detailed setup work for the intimate exchange that follows between Peter and Jesus. Peter the disciple - the broken man - who, on the night Jesus was arrested, had gathered around a different charcoal fire to keep himself warm near where Jesus was being interrogated. And there, by that charcoal fire, he was asked first by a woman, “You are this man’s disciples, aren’t you?” “I am not,” lied Peter. A few moments later, others around the fire asked him, “You aren’t one of his disciples are you?” “I am not,” he said again more forcefully. And a moment later, a man asked him, “Did I not see you with him?” Peter denied knowing Jesus a third

time. Three denials. Imagine Peter's shame. How many times after that third denial did he replay the scene in his head - did he torture himself with a past he wished he could do over? What labels buzzed in his head? What negative self-images haunted him after this moment? Liar, betrayer, coward, failure. The Gospel of Mark says Peter "broke down and wept" in shame after his final denial. To match the three denials, Jesus asks Peter three questions as they ate breakfast on the beach. Three times, as if to erase the three denials, Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" I wonder if Peter struggled to look Jesus in the eyes during this love-interrogation. Did he avert his eyes in shame? Three times, in answer to the three questions, Peter says, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." It's one of those moments in the stories of Jesus - and there are many others like it - when Jesus the healer, Jesus the embodiment of the majestic God's love and grace - Jesus treats a broken person as if they were the only person in the world, and loves them back to life.

And consider Paul's experience in today's reading from Acts. The story is familiar, depicted in that dramatic Caravaggio painting, which portrays Paul being thrown from his horse by heavenly light. Paul, who was known at the time by his Hebrew name, "Saul," was heading for the city of Damascus to arrest Christians, when a blinding light and a divine voice tackled him to the ground. The voice told him to change his ways; the light stole his eyesight. Blinded and bruised, Paul was led into the city where he waited to meet a man named Ananias - a healer, who could restore Paul's eyesight. But Ananias didn't want to meet Paul, and he actually argued with God when God told him to go. "I don't want to go," said Ananias, "I've heard rumors about Paul; he's a bad man." God insisted, and so Ananias went. But the bright light, the voices from the sky, the arguing with God, these are not the point of this story. This is all setup work for the exchange that follows where Ananias the healer meets Paul - Paul, a man once seething with rage and violent religious zeal, now humbled and broken and bedridden. How much regret did Paul live with? How many scenes from his past did he replay in his head, wishing for a redo? What's so beautiful about this story, to me, is that it's not just Paul's eyes that get opened; Ananias also sees differently - he sees with God's eyes of love and grace, sees a person he once feared, a person he once considered an "other" to be shunned, he sees Paul as a fellow child of God, and object of grace. And Ananias becomes God's agent to love Paul into a new life.

It's a story that reminds me of a Facebook post by a man named "Jeff." The post was a kind of confession posted on a church's Facebook page. "I struggle with despising people," confessed Jeff. "And not even for very good reasons. That guy in the massive pickup who's tailgating me, the smarmy ... business types eating hundred-dollar lunches, the horrifically overconfident mom sharing her conversation with the entire coffee shop. I somehow find the energy to [think nasty things about] such people every single day. I'm a hater. I realize that I do this," he says. "And I realize that I do this because I'm a person, who, well, does this sort of thing. And how do you become something that you're not? I've been looking for tools to help me break out of this ridiculous cycle, something to help me see others as more than caricatures or embodiments of trends I despise. And I found such a tool, when I served ... communion on a recent Sunday at [my church]. I looked at [everyone] ... and said, 'Child of God, the body of Christ, broken for you.' Child of God. Child of God. We're all children of God," says Jeff. "And we've been given the authority, even the duty, to declare that to each other. And so I find myself [now in my everyday life blessing people I once despised]. ... In my mind I bless them. I look into their eyes ... , and say, 'Child of God.'"

I think this is what drove Jesus to restore Peter back to life on the beach near the charcoal fire. To treat Peter as more than the labels - liar, betrayer, coward, failure - to treat Peter, in a moment of sheer grace, as if he were the only person on earth. To look into his eyes and heal him by saying, "Child of God." And maybe this is what inspired Ananias to meet with Paul - the realization that no one is so "other" that they're disqualified from God's grace. That the God who knitted the heavens and painted the galaxies on the canvas of the sky, can also concern herself with loving a former persecutor of the church back to life; that God can and does, as Reverend Nadia Bolz-Weber says, help "people to see themselves as [She] sees them," as beloved children, empowering them - empowering us - to become "both humble recipients and generous givers of grace."

Paul went on to write nearly half of our New Testament. Peter went on to be remembered in Christian history as the first Bishop of Rome. Both, together, founded a church that has lasted more than two thousand years. What kind of church might we be now - what kind of church might we leave as a legacy to the generations who come after us - if we treated everyone, regardless of their past or current state in life, no matter where they come from, as a beloved child of God? Amen.