***CREATIVE THINKING***

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Texts: Psalm 65 and Romans 1:18-22

Did you see the pictures taken from the Webb telescope that were released this week? They are spectacular! The telescope has given us views of portions of the universe never seen before. There are stunning images of dazzling shapes and colors, including the closest star-forming region to earth a mere 390 light years away! In a statement, NASA Administrator Bill Nelson noted:

*In just one year, the James Webb Space Telescope has transformed humanity’s view of the cosmos, peering into dust clouds and seeing light from faraway corners of the universe for the very first time. Every new image is a new discovery, empowering scientists around the globe to ask and answer questions they once could never dream of.*

The telescope has observed a broad range of galaxies and other celestial objects, creating a catalog of cosmic phenomena that could change the way scientists understand the universe. It has enabled us to see an [unusual star on the brink of exploding](http://www.cnn.com/2023/03/14/world/webb-telescope-wolf-rayet-star-scn/index.html), identified [elements in icy space clouds](http://www.cnn.com/2023/01/23/world/webb-telescope-ice-chemistry-scn/index.html), captured [hidden structures inside spiral galaxies](http://www.cnn.com/2023/02/17/world/webb-telescope-stars-galaxies-scn/index.html), spied [weather patterns on a distant planet](http://www.cnn.com/2023/03/22/world/webb-telescope-distant-planet-clouds-scn/index.html), and spotted [water on a rare comet](http://www.cnn.com/2023/05/15/world/webb-telescope-rare-comet-scn/index.html).[[1]](#endnote-1) In doing so, it reminds us that the universe is an immensely grand and fascinating space in which to live!

There are those who fear such discoveries, fear that somehow a glimpse into the depths of the universe will reveal secrets that negate our faith in a God who created all things, fear that our place in the universe will be so small that God could not possibly take note of us let alone love us, fear that the revelations of science will somehow challenge the authority of the Bible in telling us about God’s role in creation. The stories of creation in the Bible were never intended to be scientific accounts of how all things came to be. New Testament scholar N.T. Wright addresses it directly in these words:

*[The Genesis stories of creation] are not, and are not intended to be, what we would call scientific accounts…. [T]hey are poetic images, narratives replete with metaphor, stories designed to help us grasp with our right brains what creation is for. As Jonathan Sacks, until recently the chief rabbi of the United Kingdom, says again and again in his book The Great Partnership: God, Science and the Search for Meaning, science takes things apart to see how they work, but religion puts things together to see what they mean*.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

Science reveals to us the wonder of what is there and suggestions of how it was done, but our faith reveals to us what science can never prove – the divine power that brings all this into being, answering questions of *who* and *why* while science address the question of *how* and *when*!

Within the pages of Scripture, humans make, build, and construct, but God alone creates – the Hebrew word is *bara* and it is unique to God. God alone *bara*s, for God alone is the creator of all things:

the stars, planets, comets, and gas clouds within our sight and far

beyond,

the mountains, valleys, seas, streams, and fields on our blue planet,

the vast variety of animals, insects, and plant life that surround and

sometimes infest us,

and the human beings – good, bad, and ugly alike – with whom we live.

All things are created by God, and they are far more wonderful than we imagine as the Webb telescope and atomic microscopes and innovations in modern medicine are revealing to us. We, like all things – apart perhaps from poison ivy and mosquitos – are fearfully and wonderfully made, and we should appreciate and celebrate the wonder of it all on a daily basis!

In his letter to the Romans, Paul suggests that God’s power at work in the world should be plain to us in the things God has made – in the roar of ocean surf and the power of thunderstorms, in the growth cycles of crops and the seasons of the year, in the miracle of birth and the miracles that surprise us in unexpected moments again and again – coincidences that are God’s divine hand working anonymously! Those who deny knowing God are without excuse, writes Paul, for the evidence of God’s hand at work is plainly visible, and the wonder of it all demands of us a response – to honor and give thanks to the God who created it all! John Calvin puts it this way in the opening chapter of his Institutes of the Christian Religion:

*No one can look upon himself without immediately turning his thoughts to the contemplation of God, in whom he “lives and moves”. For, quite clearly, the mighty gifts with which we are endowed are hardly from ourselves; indeed, our very being is nothing but subsistence in the one God. Then, by these benefits shed like dew from heaven upon us, we are led as by rivulets to the spring itself. Indeed, our very poverty better discloses the infinitude of benefits reposing in God*.[[3]](#endnote-3)

In other words, the miracle of creation and the sustaining of all things is so far beyond our capacity, that we should be led to appreciate the immense power of God that could do such things so magnificently and inspire us to offer to God our thanks and praise.

Paul’s point to the Romans is that rather than offering thanks and praise, the people were giving themselves or idols credit for what God was doing; in so doing they rejected the God whose creative thinking should have been so readily apparent to them. “*Claiming to be wise, they became fools*,” he writes. I wonder: Are we any less foolish? We may not turn to idols of wood or stone, but we have made idols of other things that have turned us away from God.

Last week Dan, Lucy, Tally, and I hiked at St. Mary’s Wilderness near Raphine. It is a beautiful hike along a path that crosses the creek four times on the way up to waterfalls with some natural swimming holes, though the water is, to be charitable, somewhat brisk! Along the way we met a group from the Department of Wildlife Resources who were doing some work to measure the population of trout in the stream. In the 20th century the stream had been badly damaged by acid rain, the result of runoff from abandoned mines, and over the last 20 years, efforts had been made to add lime to the waters to try to balance the PH levels to a more sustainable level. They were hopeful that the stream was approaching a healthy balance so that further treatments would not be necessary, and life in the stream could thrive.

Now how could we have allowed such damage to happen? Across our nation there are a host of such streams, damaged by runoff from mines whose minerals were extracted for profit without regard to the impact on the environment. Mountaintops were blasted away to ease access to coal with little concern for the impact on those at the foot of the mountains. Toxic waste sites still await cleanup from dangerous chemicals dumped into the ground and waters. Wetlands that provided buffers against hurricanes have been drained in order to build vacation homes and golf courses. Rivers in the west have become a battleground as farmers and urbanites battle for water to irrigate fields and sustain life in desert cities. In Ukraine, mines and the weapons of war have made fertile ground fatal. People want to live where they want to live and grow what they want to grow and do what they want to do and profit from what they want to profit from, with little regard for the impact on this world God has made.

Some will argue that God has given us this world to do with as we please, but that is a misreading of the biblical mandate. We are created to be stewards of God’s good creation – to exercise dominion and care, not domination and exploitation – over the land, seas, and skies God has given us. Our misuse has resulted in pollution and damage that has accelerated climate change with all its attendant problems so evident in our world lately – rising seas, destructive floods in one area and damaging drought in another, record-setting heat across our nation and world, and forced migration of people as the land becomes unproductive and uninhabitable. As Samuel Wells notes:

*Global warming is a problem that arises as an almost inevitable result of seeking a world without God. The ecological crisis, in Augustine’s terms, is simply expressed: we have used what should be enjoyed*.[[4]](#endnote-4)

God has created this world with all its wonder and fruitful blessings for us to enjoy and appreciate, a world with abundant resources to be shared and managed in order to provide a good life for ourselves and for future generations. Our response to those good gifts is twofold: thanks and praise, and responsible caretaking! Psalm 65 gives voice to that thanks and praise – encouraging us to appreciate the wonder of the world and the creative work of the God who made it all. “*Those who live at earth’s farthest bounds are awed by your signs,*” sings the psalmist. “*You make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy!*” We are urged to join those gateways of the day in singing God’s praise, in appreciating the wonder of this universe in which we live, and because it is a wonderful precious thing, to care for it accordingly. “*Just as each work of art is precious to the artist, each bird, tree, fish, plant, river, mountain, wetland, ocean, and ecosystem is precious to the Creator,*”[[5]](#endnote-5) writes Brian McLaren. It is all precious to God. Is it as precious to you? Amen

1. www.CNN.com/2023/07/12/world/webb-telescopes-first-anniversary-image-scn/index.html [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. N. T. Wright, *Surprised By Scripture*, HarperOne:2014, p.142 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.1.1, [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Samuel Wells, *Incarnational Ministry*, Eerdmans Publishing:2017, p.74 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Brian McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration*, Convergent: New York, 2016, p.60 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)