

“True Light”

Jeremiah 31:7-14; Ephesians 1:3-14, John 1:1-18

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From the Pulpit

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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, January 2, 2022, Christmas 2, dedicated to the memory of Bishop Desmond Tutu who entered eternal life on December 26 at the age of 90, to the Rev. Drs. Marti Baumer and Nancy Livingston for their lifetime of love and leadership in the United Church of Christ, to all the astronomers and scientists who study the stars and the universe, to all the doctors and nurses and health care professionals throughout the world who are caring for patients with COVID19 and all sorts of other diseases and always to the glory of God!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Last Sunday morning, while many of us were still asleep, a telescope was launched into space. On December 26 at 7:20 a.m. EST the Ariane 5 Rocket lifted off from the European spaceport of Kurú, in French Guiana carrying the James Webb – the largest telescope ever sent into space. The James Webb has been sent into the far reaches of space to observe – no less than – the origins of the Universe.

The James Webb will orbit the Sun some 1.5 million kilometers away (which for those of who prefer miles to kilometers is 935,056 miles away) with the ambitious mission of answering two fundamental questions for humanity:

Where do we come from? And are we alone in the universe?

Its power should allow it to scrutinize the “cosmic dawn”, the moment when the first galaxies began to illuminate the universe after the Big Bang, 13.8 billion years ago. It should help us look back and understand the formation of stars and galaxies, to observe exoplanets so that astronomers will discover more of them, and eventually be able to identify others like Earth – somewhere in the future.

Following in the footsteps of the Hubble telescope – which revolutionized the observation of the universe – including the discovery of the existence of a black hole in the center of all galaxies, the James Webb will offer an unprecedented view of the universe at near-infrared and mid-infrared wavelengths.

This will allow scientists to study a great variety of celestial objects. Scientists will be able to look back in time more than 13.5 million years to see the first galaxies that were born after the Big Bang. I’m not one to understand how you can look back 13.5 million years, but science can tell you more.

After takeoff, NASA highlighted in a tweet sent out across the globe: *“An exciting new decade of science has begun... The James Webb will change our understanding of space as we know it.”* Astronomer, Michelle Thaller added, *“This is an historic day. This telescope is not only about advancing in the knowledge of the first galaxies that were born after the Big Bang – the great*

explosion that is considered to have originated the universe. This is about knowing more about “my history, your history, our history.”

Thank you, James Webb and everyone who worked so hard to put this telescope into space. What a great Christmas gift to share with the entire universe!

Where do we come from? And are we alone in the universe?

These are questions that matter to us all. Cosmology – the science of the origin and development of the universe – matters to all of us. As a people of faith, we read in the Gospel of John today about Jesus’ human origins being described in cosmological language. Essentially, John is ultimately concerned about where we come from and the origins of life and faith. For John, Jesus enters the world not as a baby born to Mary in Bethlehem but as the “*Logos*” or the “The Word” – God’s essential power of creation and redemption all wrapped up in the presence of one eternal being whom we call Jesus Christ.

John is saying, focus the James Webb this way and we will show you The Way, The Truth and The Life of the World – and yes, the Universe. The Word is born of True Light out of true darkness. He is, if you will, the Big Bang of our Universe. As Light, He is the first created thing. He is energy incarnate. As such, he is Life as well.

To accept him, John says, is to accept this origin story of life entering the world through his cosmic energy and eternal light. To accept him is to embrace this true life and light. Conversely, John says to us, to not accept or to reject “the true light” is actually to reject the very essence of God. Essentially, The Word is the only one who can make God known in the world, in John’s view. If you don’t see Jesus as the

only Light of God (the only Messiah) you relinquish all covenantal relationship with God, according to John. This is what he is saying.

This is where John's cosmology – which is poetic and powerful – breaks down as it collides with John's personal worldview. This is problematic to say the least. We know some things about John's theological view – as it unfolds in the Gospel. We know he uses the Greek term for “the Jews” or “*hoi Ioudaioi*” more than 70 times in his Gospel. He uses this all the time. Originally, the term was meant to refer to the “residents of Judea.” Later it became more generic and John used it to speak of all Jews. So, he consistently translates “the Jews” as every Jew everywhere. In his own personal process of self-definition and differentiation from his faith tradition as a religious Jew, John casts a wide net and seems to constantly attack all Jews who don't follow Jesus. As I said, it is problematic at the least. Translated through the ages, it has become more than problematic. It has become anti-Semitic and anti-Judaism.

Taken for its poetic power, John's cosmology draws us in. However, his theology pushes us away. The very grace and truth that Christ embodies – grace upon grace – is not reflected in the turning on and turning away from those who don't see it John's way.

In other words, the beautiful James Webb telescope placed in the scriptures through the Gospel of John – meant to show us the far reaches of time and space; of light and life; of grace and truth breaks down when it points inwardly against sisters and brothers on the ground and in the world.

Let us receive the beautiful cosmology and reject the anti-Semitic theology, if it is possible to love poetry and reject the poison. I believe “The Word made flesh and dwelling among us” would prefer

us to love everyone rather than judge anyone. He offers one example after another in his own way of living and abiding in life, light, and love. Watch his examples as his disciples through the years show us a better way. One such disciple is worthy of note today. His name was Desmond Mpilo Tutu.

This past Sunday, as The James Webb was lifting into interstellar orbit from French Guinea, the soul of Bishop Desmond Tutu was lifted into eternal life and the arms of his Savior in Cape Town, South Africa.

The Most Reverend Desmond Tutu, the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, was a moral compass for South Africa and the whole world. He grounded his pragmatic and practical faith in the biblical truth from the Book of James that “faith without works is dead.” He was an outspoken opponent of South Africa’s Apartheid system of racial segregation and white minority rule – which he battled nonviolently until those walls came tumbling down.

In 1984, he was presented the Nobel Peace Prize. In 1990, as Archbishop of Cape Town, he joined Nelson Mandela to negotiate the end of apartheid and establish multiracial democracy. He then chaired what is considered to be, the most powerful gathering of Truth and Reconciliation ever – the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which President Mandela put him in charge of. The Commission investigated ALL past human rights abuses committed by pro- and anti-apartheid groups.

In the years that followed, Bishop Tutu campaigned for gay rights. He became one of the most outspoken people to support gay rights across the globe. He then spoke out on a wide range of subjects including his support for Palestinians in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

(while simultaneously supporting Israel's right to exist as a nation). He continued to serve and speak out until his last years when he was less in the public eye and was fighting for his own life against cancer.

Yesterday, with a service limited to 100 people in the cathedral because of COVID19, Bishop Desmond Tutu was laid to rest in a simple pine box casket. The True Light that shined in Desmond Tutu was light from God.

It was the light of Christ. I was struck this week by three quotes attributed to Desmond Tutu (an author of 13 books). On peace he said, *"If you want peace, you don't talk to your friends. You talk to your enemies."* On forgiveness he said, *"Forgiveness says you are given another chance to make a new beginning."* Finally, on hope he penned, *"Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness."*

The True Light of God is reflected in both the Vertical lift of Light from Earth to Heaven and Heaven to Earth and the Horizontal Light of God which shines from person to person – throughout all creation – as we walk the way of faith. God's True Light meets in the center of the cross – where the beams of the cross come together – at the intersection of the Vertical and Horizontal.

As we begin this new year of our Lord, 2022, I invite you to gather at table of God's Grace and hold your focus on the center of the cross where everything comes together. And let us remember where we come from and that we are not alone in this Universe. We come from the True Light of God and we are never alone in this Universe because God's Word and Light guide us.

In the beautiful cosmological words that open the Gospel of John, let us begin again:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

Amen.