



The Firmament Beside Us

January 23, 2022: Holy Eucharist Rite II for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany

The Reverend Nick Morris-Kliment

Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

Perhaps some of you know about the James Webb Telescope that was in the news a few weeks ago. Decades in the making, a narrative full of drama and budget overages, bureaucratic sclerosis, snafus, as well as brilliant science, determination, persistent curiosity, the telescope launched on Christmas Day, its purpose nothing less than to delve into the origin of all creation, the Big Bang. On January 8th, the New York Times reported that it was fully deployed, as the mirrors that it uses to gather light from the cosmos unfolded like some bionic flying pterodactyl.

The Psalmist tells us that “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows his handiwork...It goes forth from the uttermost edge of the heaven and runs about to the end of it again.” Though the psalmist is referring to the sun, as I prayed with the Psalm this past week, this telescope immediately came to my mind. Though the psalmist would have been stupefied and terrified by such a contraption, I think the Webb telescope reflects our human hunger, whether explicitly religious or not, to celebrate and explore the unfathomable, infinite, limitless grandeur of the glory of God, the ever-expanding firmament that shows God’s handiwork.

The psalm also reminds me of Eucharistic Prayer C, found in our Prayer Book beginning on page 367 in the Prayer Book. Would you open to page 370 please, those of you who are in our worship space? And let’s pray it responsively: **God of all Power, Ruler of the Universe, you are worthy of Glory and Praise. Glory to you for ever and ever. At your command all things came to be: the vast expanse of interstellar space, galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses, and this fragile earth, our island home. By your will they were created and have their being.**

The Psalmist then transitions from the grandeur of creation to the grandeur of the Law. The Psalm writer refers to the living tradition, the oral tradition of God’s communications with the prophets and sages like Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah that came to be written down as Psalms were also being written down. They all came together as The Hebrew Bible that we know today in written form.

The Jewish people gathered around this Word, especially in the reading from Nehemiah today. The people have journeyed back to Jerusalem after two generations in captivity in Babylon. Amidst the rubble they are rebuilding, they listen to the Word of God read aloud and interpreted by Ezra and the other priests and scribes. They weep tears of sorrow at the state of their homeland, and they weep tears of joy that God has brought them back. This Scripture embodied the Law of God, the Word of God, that guides every aspect of life, that the psalmist describes and experiences as perfect, reviving the soul, giving



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wisdom to the innocent, rejoicing the heart, giving light to the eyes, enlightening God's servants. Sweeter than honey and more to be desired than much fine gold.

These are the Scriptures that Jesus knew by heart. We know that he was immersed in the teachings of his faith since a boy—recall when his parents found him in the temple thinking he was lost but was in fact engaging with teachers of the law. This morning, the Gospel tells us that it was his custom to come to the synagogue on the Sabbath. He knows God's word.

Jesus comes from having spent 40 days in the wilderness, where, full of the Spirit, he has resisted the temptations of the devil to misuse his power. He returns to Nazareth of Galilee, his hometown, filled with the power of the Spirit, the same Spirit which descended upon him in baptism, through which God told him he was beloved, the power of the same God who created the Cosmos, to give his first sermon.

Jesus was in his hometown synagogue, with people who had known him and his family since he was born. He may have had some brothers and sisters in the congregation, his mother, his father perhaps. Perhaps colleagues from the carpentry shop. Maybe some playmates from his youth. Adults who maybe had scolded him or watched after him when his parents needed a hand. Remember he is about 30, and he's just come back from 40 days in the desert, where he has had the most profound religious experience. An experience that has launched him into this public ministry. He clearly was in the lector rotation at his synagogue, and it was his turn to read.

He read the lesson, and then he gave his inaugural sermon.

It has the virtue of brevity. "**Today** this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." What is the scripture that has been fulfilled? Jesus has read from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. It is quoted more often in the New Testament than any other Book of the Hebrew Bible. Sometimes it is called the 5th Gospel. It's short, so let me read it again: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind to let the oppressed go free to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Good News. Today.

I wonder where each of us may be feeling poor today. I wonder where each of us may be feeling captive today. I wonder where each of us may be feeling blind today. I wonder where each one of us may be feeling oppressed today.



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Jesus says: I am here to bring Good News to you. Starting today. That place where we are feeling poor, Jesus is here to help us know real riches, starting Today.

That place where we are captive, Jesus here to help you break out, today

That place where we need light to see your way through, Jesus is here with that

Light, Jesus *is that Light*, starting today. That place where we are feeling oppressed, Jesus is here to help us find a way out of no way, starting today.

The unfathomable power who created the universe—who spoke the firmament into being, that cosmos that the Webb telescope explores, that power comes through the Spirit in Jesus—comes to be with us, to set us free, free to set others free as well.

Amen.