

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Keep Looking Up

Luke 10.38-42

July 17, 2022

There's a lot of things that always need to be done, and no one knows that better than Martha and the Marthas of the world. There's a lot to do everywhere you look. Our work-obsessed culture knows that well. There's a lot of good to do. Over-busy church activity calendars and over-committed volunteers give witness that.

Sometimes you just need to stop. To stop and be still and sit at the feet of the Lord and consider your place in the universe in which you are so very small and so very precious.

Mary sits. Mary does something so unique, the gospel writer uses a word only used here in the whole Bible. She 'sat' at the Lord's feet. To sit at the Lord's feet is what a disciple does, which makes this unusual enough because a woman sitting in the posture of a disciple to a teacher was not at all a normal thing. Disciples were men. Maybe Mary doesn't know this. Maybe she doesn't care. Maybe she does know this and does care, and sits as a disciple quite on purpose, as if to say—I'm one of you now; I'm part of this. You've made me part of this. And this movement is big enough for me. She sits as a disciple.

But there's something even more in the description. The verb for what she does is not the usual word for sit. It means to sit beside, and this is the only time in all of the Bible the word is used. It's not the normal word for sitting. This is more like someone who gets as close as you possibly can to someone else; someone who loves in the presence and proximity of the one she loves. When you love, you can't get close enough sometimes.

And this is why Mary becomes emblematic of the love of God called contemplation. Contemplation is the love whose gaze is fixed on the beloved; it cannot be torn away or distracted. Contemplation wants to sit beside as long as possible. Contrasted with her sister Martha's busy, active service, Mary, sitting at the feet of Jesus, is the icon of the contemplative love of God. Contemplation is a long look at the truth of a thing; it's paying close attention with delight; it's the love of God fully embracing you and overflowing within you.

Instead of just looking at Mary looking at Jesus, let us turn our eyes with her toward him. The one before whom Mary sits, the one who has captured her heart, her contemplative gaze is worthy of our devotion, our attention, our prayer, our honor, our faith, our love. He is the image of the invisible God. The epistle to the Colossians speaks of Christ in these grand sweeping terms. He's the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. All things were created in him and for him. He is before all created things and in him, all things hold together.

So, the one before whom Mary sits near, the one who fills the aperture of her vision is the very image, the Word made flesh, the image of the invisible God of the universe, the very one in

whom all things that are created are created and the one for whom they are created, including her and including you. And so, she becomes the symbol of our prayer when we, too, set aside the distractions and busyness and responsibilities to just sit and be in the presence of the image of the invisible God. That's a pretty remarkable thing, to draw close to the God of the universe in intimacy.

God's always been grand for those paying attention. That's even more apparent now than ever before. God, in those terms, got a lot bigger this week. I'm thinking of the images from the Webb telescope I can hardly take my eyes off of this week. I hope you've seen them. There were times this week when it seemed like the world's jaws collectively hit the floor. Mine did. I couldn't look away. I've had that experience only a few times in my life when I was so moved by what filled my eyes: the Grand Canyon at night lit by the full moon, the Venus de milo, a pizza in Naples, and these pictures of deep space. (And my wife and my children.)

Our church fathers from St. Augustine to St. Bonaventure were avid observers of the cosmos. "Creation," Bonaventure wrote 700 years ago, "is like a book from which we can gather insights about the Creator." (Ilia Delio, *The Emergent Christ*, 13) Of course, he wasn't the first. In the prophets--Amos and Job--people were told, "Look up." In those two books, people who have gotten a little big for their britches are told to look up in the night sky and tremble. The prophet Amos warns the people (5.8), look up: the God who made the Pleiades and Orion constellations and turns deep darkness into the morning and darkens the night into day, The Lord is his name and the Lord has you in the palm of his hand for either your life or your destruction.

Job, likewise, was instructed to look up to the constellations of stars and embrace being humbled, "Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades or loose the cords of Orion, lead the Mazzasroth in their season or guide the bear with its children?" he was asked, and of course, his answer was no. "Where were you when all of this was created?" was the question posed to Job. For all time humans have been looking up for guidance on their journeys, for perspective on their problems, and for insights into the immensity of their creator.

The human eye can only see a small fraction of what the Webb telescope can show us, but even that is enough for a person who really considers how small they are relative to the cosmos.

The Psalmist speaks for all humanity, "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars which you have set in place, what are human beings that you are mindful of them?" Even momentarily considering the vastness of the cosmos makes you humble, doesn't it? It can even create an existential crisis.

Looking at the first images from the Webb telescope this week of deep space and time, how could you feel anything other than awe? No one in all of history has ever seen what we could see this week. It's the first time—uncountable galaxies in a pixel of the sky the size of a grain of sand. Cosmic clouds birthing new stars. The images are beautiful and terrifying. How do you make sense of this?

Reactions were quick as commentators noted multiple ways the Webb telescope achievement is both amazing and terrifying, from the vastness and emptiness of space to the possibility that our lives are so insignificant as to be meaningless.

One theologian wrote, “I cried.” (Dorothy Butler Bass)

A New York Times journalist was assigned to sit quietly in the corner of the room of scientists pouring over the first images. “Wow,” they kept murmuring as they took in what they were seeing for the first time. He writes: “The screen zooms in, in, in toward a jutting promontory many light-years long that stands out in sharp relief. ‘Oh my god,’ someone says — only that someone was me, accidentally. ‘Welcome to the team,’ someone else responds.”

Later, a scientist gasped, and a room full of scientists giggled.

What’s happening here? Theologians crying, journalists blurting out prayers in conference rooms, scientists giggling.

And then there are just those who marvel at the people who engineered the actual satellite project. the writer speaks for all of us in confessing his own inadequacies compared to those people:

Some members of the human race actually devote their lives to understanding the universe, like the people who designed and built the Webb Space Telescope. The culmination of 20 years of planning, Webb is essentially a six-meter-wide mirror made of gold-covered beryllium shielded by a tennis-court-sized sun shield. All that was folded up like origami into the nose cone of an Ariane 5 rocket, which was then blasted into space. The rocket dropped the unconstructed telescope at Lagrange point 2, a specific spot in space four times further away from earth than the moon. There, the Webb Telescope unfolded itself so it could collect infrared light that lets us see galaxies as they existed just after the Big Bang. I had a hard time putting together my desk from Ikea. ¹

Whatever the existential questions, here’s the theological question: do we have a Christology adequate for this universe? Or does God retreat further and further to our small little lives and nostalgias? Over the centuries, new discoveries about the universe and history of the world have rattled Christians, but I think for the most part because their God was too small. We no longer have that option.

Either the immensity of the invisible God is sufficient for the universe we’re seeing unveiled, or our ideas of God and the scope of our faith will retreat to the infinitesimal scope of our personal feelings, and that’s a God way too small for both this universe and for who God is.

¹ <https://lifehacker.com/8-ways-the-james-webb-space-photos-are-giving-me-an-exi-1849175463/slides/6>

In 1962, around the dawn of the age of space exploration, Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler preached before the world council of churches. He preached on Colossians 1, our epistle passage this morning. Of Colossians 1, Sittler said, “These verses sing out their triumphant and alluring music between two huge and steady poles “Christ” and “all things” . . . For it is here declared that the sweep of God’s restorative action in Christ is no smaller than the six times repeated *ta panta* [Greek: all things].” If you read the passage, you’ll note Paul says over and over, Christ...all things... all things... all things... all things... all things... All things are in him and for him.

Sittler goes on, “Redemption is the name for this will, this action, and this concrete Man of God who is with us and for us—and all things are permeable to his cosmic redemption because all things subsist in him . . . In propositional form, it is simply this: a doctrine of redemption is meaningful only when it swings within the larger orbit of a doctrine of creation. For God’s creation of earth cannot be redeemed in any intelligible sense of the word apart from a doctrine of the cosmos which is Christ’s home, Christ’s definite place, the theater of Christ’s selfhood under God... (39-40).”

In other words, this: If all reality just got bigger in our eyes, if we are stretched now to imagine a cosmos that’s bigger than we’ve ever imagined, then God’s redemptive love just got more immense, too. Consider that for a moment. When some people consider their place in the vast scope of deep space, they feel utterly alone. That’s understandable. But what if in considering those new images, we instead consider anew and afresh and will full eyes how great God is and how great a love must be from a God who creates all of this.

Maybe at just a moment in time when humans are in such a hot mess, they need the love of God more than ever, we were just served witness to that love writ larger than we ever could have imagined. Oh, the deep, deep love of Jesus? It just got deeper. Oh, Amazing Grace? It just got more amazing. The immensity of God is grand enough for this universe, and there’s quite enough love in it for all.

Christian proclamation must not be weak where the human heartache is most strong. Sittler said in that same sermon I’ve been quoting: “Our vocabulary of praise has become personal, pastoral, too purely spiritual, static. We have not affirmed as inherent in Christ—God’s proper place for human’s proper selfhood and society—the world political, the world economical, the world aesthetic, and all other commanded orderings of actuality which flow from the ancient summons to tend this garden of the Lord.” (46) We’ve been preaching a God that’s too small, praying to a God that’s too small, and trusting a God that’s too small.

The psalmists help turn our eyes upward again: *O Lord, our Lord how majestic is your name*. I can hear that song of praise in the pulsing heartbeat of Mary’s sit-beside. O Lord, my Lord, how majestic is your name.

When we sit at the feet of Jesus, do we realize what we are doing? What happens here in these moments in this place of worship and places like this all over the world, is, seems to me, the

only thing humans do that comes at all near enough to the truth of our reality. Those scientists and that journalist in the room with the photos had a glimpse of it. Wow, O my God, Is this the real thing? Laughter. It's the liturgy of wonder before an awesome God.

For it is here, in worship, that we sit near the feet of the one who holds all this together, who holds all things together, the one in whom all is created and for whom all is created, and the one who holds us together when we feel on those days that we are being ripped apart at the seams. To fill our eyes with Christ is the only response we can have to the wonder unveiled before us. All of our Martha activity is good and has its place in all our lives, but we stop; we are silent; we are humbled; we are not alone; we are held together with one another and with our fellow creatures on this planet; and in the immensity and intimacy of God, held with all, all, all creation from alpha to omega, beginning to end, forever and ever.

When we break the bread, we break open the body of the cosmos made bread and wine, and the one in whom and for whom grain and grape and those who receive them were created.

You are not insignificant; that's the grace.

You are connected, but that's not a strong enough word. You are held together with all things and all people in Christ, who is the head of the church; that's the love.

In the vastness of this universe, there's a place for you at the feet of Jesus. With penetrating gaze, we sit near the very one by whom, in whom, and for whom all of this exists. And the one whose own body was broken open for the redemption of the world. We sit at his feet, and he returns our gaze with his own and with the only word echoing through space and time: "Love".