

Seeing the Light

I am fascinated by the James Webb Space Telescope. Launched in late December, it reached its “LaGrange point” a month ago today. That is the point where it was aimed to both stop and stay (like the nativity star), orbiting around the sun at the same pace as the Earth. Just a million miles away.

There are so many things that are thrilling and interesting about this project, involving many very excited, not to mention ecstatic, scientists. Note that if you read the blog about the telescope on Nasa’s webpage, you will find these kinds of words. I also appreciate in these tense and stressful times that it is a celebration of collaboration between NASA, the European Space Agency, and the Canadian Space Agency.

The James Webb Space Telescope is amazing for its technology, the “made by human hands” spectacular achievement. For me, the fascination comes not only from the science, but also the connection to light and life that is profoundly divine. I cannot read some of the descriptions of the design and tasks of the telescope without hearing echoes of scripture, such as the verses from Psalm 8.

Take, for example, the description of what the Webb will be able to detect and image: first light, assembly of galaxies, birth of stars and proto-planetary systems, origins of life! In the same way that the book of Genesis describes the awe and splendor of God’s work of creation, it will also be pictured and described by this telescope. Same events, new language.

The telescope is equipped with a critical tennis court size sun shield so that it will not get overheated. On the one side, the sun will not strike it, and on the other side, its dark side, it will gather in the light. How this sounds like Psalm 121:6, “The sun won’t strike you during the day; neither will the moon at night.” Just last week the Fine Guidance Sensor began, well, guiding. The sensor’s purpose is to lock onto a guide star and keep the telescope pointed to high accuracy. Does that not describe our spiritual practices that keep us pointed to our guide star, bright morning star, Jesus?

The wonder of science and theology go hand in hand for me. God is both transcendent--beyond human understanding—and immanent—in the smallest details of life.

This Sunday we will be reading Luke’s account of the Transfiguration, an event that was beyond the understanding of the disciples who witnessed it and at the same time gave them an understanding of Jesus that would open up a new way of life. Amen, awesome God!

by Rev Karen Oehl

When I look up at
your skies, at what
your fingers made—
the moon and the
stars that you set
firmly in place—
what are human
beings that you
think about them;
what are human
beings that you pay
attention to them?

Psalm 8:3-4

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