

All Things
Reading from the New Testament: Colossians 1:15-27

We work with what we know and with the tools we have to interpret the world around us. Genesis 1, along with its next ten chapters, is often referred to as the Prehistory, the emphasis here not being an orderly timeline of historical figures and events. Rather, the focus of the Prehistory is a confessional effort of seekers trying to understand who they are; how they got here; and what it all means. It was written without calendar, clock, camera, or eyewitness observations, and was the product of thoughtful minds probing the mystery of creation, the breath of life, and the hints of the Divine. As such, it was not only Prehistory but also pre-STEM classes, which is why Genesis 1 is meant to be found in the Bible rather than the science textbook.

Contrary to the assumption of many, the scientist and theologian are not so far apart. The scientist seeks the how and the theologian seeks the why. The scientist mines for evidence and the theologian mines for meaning. They are not mutually exclusive, but they are distinct.

The writers of Genesis 1 were probing the Divine, with the help of the image then understood as the template of the known universe.

Imagine creation as a giant domed stadium with the dome being referred to as the firmament. Above the firmament? A watery chaos.

Beneath the firmament were the stars and the sun, and the floor below was the earth. Beneath the earth, more water. In fact, the dome was surrounded by this watery chaos.

And so, we read in Genesis - “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters ... And God said, ‘Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.’ So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky ... And God said, ‘Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night ... God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars ... And God saw that it was good.”

Now, I could probably draw an image of this on a dry-erase board and maybe even come up with crude cutouts for one of those old-school felt boards, but that wouldn't get me in the front door at NASA. And yet, that does nothing to diminish the power of the image to declare we are here, and however we got here, we are here because God spoke. John puts it this way, "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." We work with what we know and the tools we have to provide a framework to interpret the mystery beyond what we know, and to look for clues of meaning.

That framework has steadily expanded over time. Copernicus, was a true 16th Century Renaissance polymath, remembered as a mathematician, economist, diplomat, astronomer, and Catholic cleric with a doctorate in canon law. *(Kind of makes you feel a tad insignificant – Copernicus was remembered as a math nerd, economist, diplomat, astronomer. My epitaph won't even rise to remembered. They'll*

just stop at ... he was... He was what? Hmm, I don't remember).

Copernicus, on the other hand, was a pretty sharp guy. It was Copernicus who rocked the world with the idea that not only were we not the center of the universe; we weren't even at the center of our solar system. And thus, the framework for perceiving our place in creation expanded yet again.

Fast forward to the 1990's when the images of the Hubble telescope found their way onto our television screens. Once again, we were awed by the beauty of the galaxies and the unimaginable scope of the cosmos. Along with those photos, the science was also evolving, revealing so much more about the origins of the universe, raising a whole host of other questions about events both preceding and following the Big Bang, leading Stanford cosmologist, Andrei Linde, to observe, "These are very close to religious questions," thus echoing the Psalmist so long ago – "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are humans that you are mindful of them?"

With each passing year, it takes me a little longer to run a mile. Those sub-5-minute miles, I can now only remember as ancient history,

along with events including the Lincoln assassination and the Bicentennial. The world record for the mile, held by Hicham El Guerrouj, is 3 min., 43 sec. That's wicked fast. But consider this, 10 million trillion trillion trillionths of a second after the Big Bang the universe was so small you would have needed a microscope to see it. Yet, get this, in one million million million million millionths of a second the universe expanded from something you could hold in your hand to something 10^{25} times bigger (*for those counting – that's a one with 25 zeroes after it*). Did you catch that? In one million million million million millionths of a second the universe expands from something you can hold in your hand to something at least a hundred billion lights years across. Once again that framework for understanding our place in the universe had to be expanded. And now, just this week, we're beginning to sense that "all there is" is even bigger than we thought.

The first images from the Webb telescope this past week have prompted gobsmacked gasps across the globe, and that's just the astronomers. We're seeing glimpses of light originating over 13 billion

years ago, revealing countless nebula and galaxies. We're going to need a bigger tape measure.

What does this do to the framework from which we pose our questions about meaning? "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are humans that you are mindful of them?"

When the Hubble photos rocked our world in the 90's, I was serving a church in Hickory and participated in the local ecumenical clergy association. At our monthly breakfast, someone asked if the cosmological quake wrought through Hubble would rattle our theology if it led to the discovery of life on other planets. And without even looking up from his pancakes, a well-seasoned African American pastor said, "Doesn't change a thing between me and my Jesus."

It would seem that my colleague was a Pauline scholar. What those who reject religion and those who reject science miss so horribly is the awe-inspiring intersection between science and theology. Mystery and science are not mutually exclusive. Theology and mystery are not mutually exclusive. And the presence of mystery (that which we cannot

fully comprehend) does nothing to erode Gospel truth or challenge the Lordship of Christ.

The Presbyterian study document, *A Declaration of Faith*, states plainly the same thing Paul was trying to get through the heads of the Colossians, “Jesus is Lord. He has been Lord from the beginning. He will be Lord at the end. Even now he is Lord.” Lordship implies complete, and ultimately, unopposable authority. Nothing is prior to that authority. Nothing succeeds that authority. Nothing falls outside of that authority. Nothing shall defeat the purposes of that authority. Everyone, every word, every act, every mistake, every event, every accident, every plan, every desire, every discovery, every failure, every wound, every triumph is to be seen, understood, and interpreted through the lens of Jesus Christ. Jesus is Lord.

Who is this Lord and what is the defining nature of Christ’s authority? Love. What is the ultimate purpose of Christ’s authority? Reconciliation. What is the final result of Christ’s authority? Wholeness. Does this sound like so much of the rhetoric, bile, and gall that we’re bombarded with today? Not exactly. Do today’s dividing lines and battle grounds reflect that understanding? Hardly.

What happens when people come together? Opinions. Doesn't matter the era, doesn't matter the venue, doesn't matter the context, people gather intent on being seen as "in the know," or at least knowing more than you. People gather intent on pushing their point, having the last word, always armed with an additional word. Preaching Christ crucified, Paul and colleagues established churches, but that didn't stop others from trying to inflict their stamp, their superiority, their expertise on the community. In Colossae, the new voices were competing – "Yeah, this Jesus thing is pretty sweet, but you need to add this from the pagan crowd down the road;" Someone else chimes in, "Well, what you really need is a good mohel. Just line 'em up and start cuttin';" To which someone else responds, "Actually, I'm bringing an astrologer to our next covered dish." In essence, these voices were saying, *Sure, Jesus is Lord ... well, at least as long as you add these other special ingredients.*

Thus, Paul and Timothy were thinking ... it's time for a letter. The language of our text this morning may sound a little more esoteric than it actually is: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all

creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible...” Yeah. Yeah. What?

It's not quite so complicated as that, and yet it is supremely important. The clue to our text today is found in a single adjective: **all**. The word shows up seven times in the text: firstborn of all creation; all things created (twice); before all things; in him all things hold together; all the fullness of God; to reconcile ... all things. All – Not a smidge, pinch, percentage, slice, share, fraction, bit, or portion ... but **all**. The author wants to make it clear. You say you believe in Jesus? Then get out your Jesus lenses, because without them, everything remains a fog, everything remains partial, everything remains incomplete. Christ is before all things; in Christ all things hold together; in Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. Paul, here, expands John's vision. Our Lord is not only the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end, but Christ is also before the beginning and after the end.

That's the lens through which Paul hopes we'll see all things. And you know what is truly unique about this lens? You know what this lens filters out? Borders, boundaries, fences, walls, prejudice, hate, self-righteousness, labels. You know what this lens refuses to filter out? The

other guy (you know, the irritating one), the science, the truth, the diversity, the vulnerable, the responsibility, the call to care. In Christ all things hold together ... and through Christ God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things ... making peace through the blood of the cross.

We are limited, finite beings, easily overwhelmed. I go into a diner with those spiral bound menus and all those pages and pictures with all those tasty options, and I'm dumbfounded/paralyzed by the choices. I look at the skies through the Webb telescope and I am blown away by the notion of infinity and our incomprehensibly small place in creation, but before and beyond there is always Christ, Christ's purpose, and Christ's always-unbounded-freely-given-never-to-be-defeated love, through which all things known and unknown **will be reconciled**. Can't you hear that preacher's voice? "Doesn't change a thing between me and my Jesus." Thanks be to God. Amen.