

Trinity Sunday A 2017

The photograph Pale Blue Dot is of the Earth was taken in February 1990 by the Voyager 1 space probe.

Voyager was 3.7 billion miles from the Earth at the time. 3.7 billion miles.

In it, Earth's apparent size is less than a pixel; a tiny dot against the vastness of space.

Voyager 1 was leaving our own solar system and was directed by NASA to turn its camera around and take this one last photograph of Earth before it disappeared.

This was Carl Sagan's idea, and he spoke about the photograph in a commencement address at Cornell a few years later:

“We succeeded in taking that picture, and, if you look at it, you see a dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever lived, lived out their lives. The aggregate of all our joys and sufferings, thousands of confident religions, ideologies and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilizations, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every hopeful child, every mother and father, every inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every superstar, every supreme leader, every saint and sinner in the history of our species, lived there – on a mote of dust, suspended in a sunbeam. The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena.”

Humans are seemingly insignificant, when we ponder the universe.

Space, time, eternity

Very small, compared to all matter and compared to God.

Sagan and others looking at the pale blue dot of the earth from afar arrived at that conclusion, but so did the Psalmist, looking into the dark night sky from ancient Jerusalem:

The Psalmist asks:

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,

the moon and the stars you have set in their courses,

What are human that you should be mindful of them?

Mortals that you should seek them out?

The clever, spiritual people we first sent into space reflected on that and remembered the Biblical witness,

The evening before Apollo 11 was to splashdown, Buzz Aldrin came over the broadcast.

He read from the Bible our psalm for today, Psalm 8:

“When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?”

For our first astronauts and for all who paid attention to their mission,

a greater awareness of the vastness of space reduced their estimation of the importance of humanity.

But only to fitting proportions. Right-sized it, you might say; perhaps returned us to a biblical understanding lost in the years of our self-glorification.

In a wonderful coincidence (?), another of today's lesson was also part of a galactic Bible lesson. Three missions before, in 1968, *Apollo 8* entered orbit around the moon, to determine if landing on the moon was possible.

On Christmas Eve, the crew broadcast a message back to earth, showing pictures of the blue green marble of our planet, feathered with swirling white, as Pilot William Anders said, "The crew of Apollo 8 has a message we would like to send you."

He began reading from Genesis 1: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void."

And the crew read on, taking turns, much as we did today, the same lesson we read this morning. The astronauts closed the broadcast with these words: "From the crew of Apollo 8, we close with Goodnight, Merry Christmas, and God bless all of you, all of you on good Earth."

The message about humanity in Genesis one is not simple.

One the one hand, we hear there that we are the crowning glory of God's creation.

Made on the last day of God's creating as the completing element of God's artistry.

Made in the image of God, sharing in God's power.

Given enormous responsibility, dominion over the earth, which is not an easy thing to hold, not a license to exploit but a charge to use well and preserve for God's glory.

That granted dominion was a sign of God's hope and confidence in humanity.

We may be specks on a speck in the universe, but we are holy specks, made in God's image and charged with mighty things.

Indeed, Psalm 8, the other passage read today and read in space, says something similar in reply to its question about what humanity is, in light of the vastness of the heavens:

You have made him but little lower than the angels;
you adorn him with glory and honor;

You give him mastery over the works of your hands;
you put all things under his feet:

Many have feared what science would reveal to us about ourselves,

have wondered what the exploration of the universe,

in space or at subatomic levels would do to Christian faith and the story of the Bible.

Perhaps we would learn too much; perhaps all mystery would be dispelled.

Perhaps we must guard our faith against intruding and corrosive knowledge.

In reality, many have seen that seeing ourselves from afar, however, or from deep within, has only deepened our appreciation of the truth of our traditional self understanding.

We are indeed small, mere creatures of God,

made of dirt, sure to return to it,

jumbles of frail tissue, with minds and wills that wander;

we are tiny in the scope of the swirling galaxies above.

But we came to be in an awesome process of creation and are meant for holiness;

a great dignity and responsibility are ours.

It is clear in Genesis and the Psalms; it is clear in the pictures beamed back from space;

we are humble parts of God's awesome universe, who achieve our God-given dignity by claiming that proper place in the scheme of all God's things.

That's why we hear in the last verses of the Gospel of Matthew of the compelling nature of the mission of the church.

It is in the life of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, that we see the perfect combination of humility and responsibility, of submission and God-given glory.

God desires all people to come to fullness of life in that mode, in Christ.

And so his name and Gospel are to be shared to the ends of the earth (and beyond, if we get the chance),

by you and all who live in his name and his ways.

This precious world and its billions of people, all made in God's image, are too beloved to be ignored.

With the humility that the Scriptures and the insights of science would teach us

and with the charge given to us by the Lord,

we can share and live that good news and share in the redemption of the world and maybe the universe, in the name of God: Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

(I used a sermon of the Rev. Kirk Neely to find the references to the use of Psalm 8 and Genesis 1 in the space program <https://kirkhneely.com/2010/10/03/praying-the-psalms-psalm-8/>).