

NATIVITY OF OUR LORD: CHRISTMAS DAY | DECEMBER 25, 2021

ISAIAH 52:7-10 | PSALM 98 | HEBREWS 1:1-4 | JOHN 1:1-14

If all went to plan, the James Webb telescope was launched into space yesterday. The Webb telescope is sort of like the Hubble Telescope on steroids. The Hubble telescope—modern marvel that it is—orbits about three hundred miles above the earth. The James Webb telescope will be around a million miles from earth. If you want a fun way to think about that difference, if you imagine the distance between earth and the Webb telescope as the distance between the church and Los Angeles, the Hubble telescope would be in Franklin Lakes.¹

But it isn't just the same thing shot farther into space. It actually sees something fundamentally different. The Hubble telescope sees mostly visible light, meaning there's a limit on how far it can see. Stuff gets caught in space dust and particles and all the rest. But the new Webb telescope can also view infrared light. Infrared light has longer wavelengths than visible light, meaning it can travel farther. This means you can see not just further geographically but chronologically, too.²

The upshot of all this—and I've pretty much exhausted my knowledge of physics here—is that the Webb telescope can see back nearly to the big bang. Some of the early estimates are that it can get within a hundred million years. It gives you a whole new perspective on what's there.

This isn't a bad way to think about what the prologue of St. John's gospel does. If you were here last night, you heard a story from St. Luke about shepherds and Mary and Joseph. About how the birth of Christ comes into the smallest corners of our lives. It's all fine and good and makes for a nice pageant.

But John takes the exact opposite approach. John doesn't tell us a new story at all. He tells us an old story. A story we already know. He tells us to look backwards and look at what's been there all along. And what's been there all along, John says, is the love of God in Christ.

So think about some of those stories from the Hebrew Bible. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. God rescued Noah from the flood. God made a covenant with Abraham's descendants. God liberated the Israelites from slavery and brought them to the promised land. God restored the people from exile. These aren't just stories about God "before" Jesus. But the Word of God is a part of these stories, too. After all, "all things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being." From the beginning, the Word of God has been acting in our lives.

¹ David von Drehle, "Opinion | The James Webb Space Telescope Is Human Hope on a Rocket," *Washington Post*, accessed December 21, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/12/10/james-webb-space-telescope-nasa-human-hope/>.

² "Comparison: Webb vs Hubble Telescope - Webb/NASA," accessed December 21, 2021, <https://www.jwst.nasa.gov/content/about/comparisonWebbVsHubble.html>.

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777 WYCKOFF AVENUE | WYCKOFF, NJ 07481
(201) 891-1031 | ADVENTLUTHERANWYCKOFF.ORG

So what we discover in the Christ child isn't a supernatural miracle that drops in from the sky or God deciding to get involved with creation after all once the other options don't work out. But that the loving action of God that we encountered in "many and various ways" through ages past has now been expressed in a radically new way: poured out in a singular human life.

John gives us the vision, the perspective, to see what's been undergirding all of that divine creation, care, and liberation in those stories from the Hebrew Bible. It doesn't fundamentally change what's going on in those stories, but it reveals a presence that we weren't aware of. Think of it like the Webb telescope showing us what's always been there but has remained beyond our grasp. The act, the energy that created and sustains the life of Jesus the Christ child was the same power that acted in many and various ways in ages past. St. John gives us the perspective to see Jesus not as a kind of weird aberration but as a sign of God's continued faithfulness.

So what's this all have to do with us? Well, let me give you one way to think about it. Think for a moment about memoirs. When you write a memoir, you look back on your life and you try to make some sense out of it. How did I get from where I started to where I am now? You zoom out. You start, as it were, "in the beginning." What makes a good memoir is someone's ability to draw a kind of narrative arc out of the randomness of life.

St. Augustine's *Confessions* is a good example of this. An awful lot of that book is Augustine trying to get away from God. And then later on he looks back, he zooms out, and realizes that even when he was trying to get away from God, God was still working in his life. God's presence and action is easier to see when you zoom way out, when you get the Webb telescope view on things.

The gift of Christmas is the ability to trust that Christ is present not simply when we zoom way out but also among and within us now, too. That even when we zoom in on the mundane and pedestrian facets of life, God is still acting, still nurturing, still giving. That the same energy that called creation into being, liberated the Israelites, inspired the prophets, and raised Christ from death, is the same energy that sustains our lives, too. To live with that perspective, to recognize the continuing action of God, is what St. John calls "eternal life." And that's exactly what Christ is here to invite us toward.

After all, John intends this description not as ending but as a beginning. "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people." Not just the matriarchs and patriarchs, not just the prophets and psalmists, not just the disciples and holy family, but all God's people throughout the ages.

The light of Christ shines among us not just "in the beginning." But in the "here and now," too.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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