

Why Both Faith and Reason are Awed

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
February 19, 2017—"Evolution Sunday"

- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Scientific inquiry enriches our appreciation for our faithful trust in God.

The mistaken notion that science and religion are inevitably in conflict has created unnecessary division and confusion through the ages. In our day we see this supposed conflict when some people propose that matters of religious belief should be included in science curriculum. A college professor in Wisconsin wanted to let the public know that many clergy from many denominations and faith traditions have tremendous respect for the science of evolutionary theory and have embraced it as a core component of human knowledge, fully harmonious with religious faith.

So it was that in 2006 this professor, a man of science who is also a Christian of sincere and deep faith, launched a campaign called The Clergy Letter Project. The intent of the Clergy Letter Project was to advance thoughtful, respectful discussion by illustrating that many, many people of faith see evolutionary science as complimentary, not contrary, to religious teachings. The Clergy Letter Project has amassed nearly 15,000 signatures from clergy of almost every faith tradition and denomination. The Presbyterian Church (USA) is among the denominations that has officially endorsed the goal of The Clergy Letter Project.

To advance discussion in congregations and to raise awareness in society, for the past twelve years The Clergy Letter Project has encouraged congregations to observe what they call "Evolution Weekend." This simply means that people of faith are given the chance to reflect on how matters of faith are enriched by human discoveries through the discipline of science. Let's do that. Listen in as we allow scripture and science to engage in a conversation with each other.

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From the book of Genesis: In the beginning, when God created the universe, the earth was formless and desolate. The raging ocean that covered everything was engulfed in total darkness... and the Spirit of God was moving over the water. [1:1-2 (GNT)]

Theologian Michael Morwood has written,

We... throw light on the mystery that is God and we find ourselves challenged to expand our notions of "God" beyond the ancient idea of a male deity ruling from the heavens. We are challenged to find a meaningful and coherent way to talk about "God" in the context of a continually expanding and evolving universe. The good news is that when we accept the challenge we find an understanding of "God" that has always been part of the Christian tradition. We were even taught it - and believed it - when we were children: "God" is an everywhere reality. "God" is everywhere as the Presence holding everything in existence and in relationship. And we need to keep remembering what we have always heard: that "God" is totally and utterly Mystery beyond all human concepts and images.¹

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From Psalm 19 The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. [v.1]

Modern technology has only increased our curiosity about our world. The realization of the enormity of the universe continues to dwarf what once seemed preposterous fantasies.

No one knows exactly how big the universe is. Scientists estimate that it contains hundreds of billions of galaxies, and that the average galaxy contains hundreds of billions of stars.

If the universe is indeed God's creation, then it seems logical that it would be created in a way that reflects his magnitude. It would be much like the ancient Hebrew psalmist who wrote: "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands."⁷

¹ From "Finding God Always and Everywhere in the New Story," by Michael Morwood, Resident Theologian at Bangor Retreat Center, Bangon, PA, at <http://www.morwood.org/-God-in-a-New-Story-of-the-Universe.html>, accessed 2/15/2017

Indeed, the universe is so massive that we struggle to comprehend its size. Perhaps this was done so that God's eternal power and divine nature could be understood from the things he created. In other words, so we could get a glimpse of just how immense God is.

Could it be that in power and majesty God is bigger than anyone can imagine? Could it be that God is showing humanity something about himself through what he created? Could it be that, as German philosopher Friedrich Schiller remarked, "the Universe is one of God's thoughts"?²

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Psalm 8 ¹ O Lord, our Lord, your greatness is seen in all the world! Your praise reaches up to the heavens; ² it is sung by children and babies. You are safe and secure from all your enemies; you stop anyone who opposes you. ³ When I look at the sky, which you have made, at the moon and the stars, which you set in their places – ⁴ what are human beings, that you think of them; mere mortals, that you care for them?⁵ Yet you made them inferior only to yourself; you crowned them with glory and honor. ⁶ You appointed them rulers over everything you made; you placed them over all creation: ⁷ sheep and cattle, and the wild animals too; ⁸ the birds and the fish and the creatures in the seas.

⁹ O Lord, our Lord, your greatness is seen in all the world! [Good News translation]

Andy Ramos shares this perspective:

In 1990 the Voyager 1 spacecraft, having completed its mission, was about to leave our solar system. As it did, NASA scientists turned the spacecraft's camera and took one last photograph of Earth from a distance of about 3.7 billion miles. What the image revealed was startling.

Dubbed the "Pale Blue Dot" by astronomer and astrophysicist Carl Sagan, this photograph shows Earth as a tiny dot, about one tenth of a pixel in size, suspended in the vast emptiness of space. https://www.google.com/search?hl=en&authuser=0&site=imghp&tbn=isch&source=hp&biw=1344&bih=712&q=Pale+Blue+dot&oq=Pale+Blue+dot&gs_l=img.3.0l10.1869.8013.0.8159.26.19.4.3.3.0.152.1406.14j2.16.0...0...1ac.1.64.img..3.23.1444.0..0i8i30k1j0i8i10i30k1.7cPAstZyO8#imgcr=KIFfpOExdTyCKM:

In his reflections on this photograph, Sagan wrote: "That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives . . . on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam."³

In a universe this immense, one cannot help but feel small. When Carl Sagan saw the Pale Blue Dot, he called Earth "a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark." This comment reflects the isolation and loneliness many of us feel. Compared to the vastness and complexity of God's creation, people seem small and insignificant.

Yet the Christian faith offers a different perspective.

Speaking to God, the psalmist wrote, "When I look at the sky, which you have made, at the moon and the stars, which you set in their places—what are human beings, that you think of them; mere mortals, that you care for them?"⁴

As he contemplated the vastness of God's creation, the psalmist voiced humanity's amazement that God cares about us.

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Psalm 19, verse 1: "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork."

How vast is our universe?... Robert Jastrow, a former head of NASA's Goddard Center, once used a clever comparison to help us grasp the immensity of the universe:

"...Let the sun be the size of an orange; on that scale of sizes the earth is a grain of sand circling in orbit around the sun at a distance of 30 feet; the giant planet Jupiter, 11 times larger than the earth, is a cherry pit revolving at a distance of... one city block; Saturn is another cherry pit two blocks from the sun; and Pluto, the outermost planet, is still another sand grain at a distance of ten city blocks from the sun.

"On the same scale the average distance between the stars is 2000 miles. The sun's nearest neighbor, a star called Alpha Centauri, is 1300 miles away. In the space between the sun and its neighbors there is nothing but a thin distribution of hydrogen atoms, forming a vacuum far better than any ever achieved on earth. The [Milky Way] galaxy, on this scale, is a cluster of oranges separated by an average distance of 2000 miles, the entire cluster being 20 million miles in diameter.

² <https://www.explorethegod.com/how-big-is-god>, accessed 2/15/2017

³ Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space* (New York: Random House, 1994).

⁴ "How Big Is God?" by Andy Ramos at <https://www.explorethegod.com/how-big-is-god>, accessed 2/14/2017

[Robert Jastrow continues,] “An orange, a few grains of sand some feet away, and then some cherry pits circling slowly around the orange at a distance of a city block. Two thousand miles away is another orange, perhaps with a few specks of planetary matter circling around it. That is the void of space (*Red Giants and White Dwarfs*, 1990, p. 15). And this is nothing compared to the space between galaxies!

“Yet to God, the entire universe is not that impressive. [According to the prophet Isaiah, God says God] stretches the entire heavens ‘like a curtain, and spreads them out like a tent to dwell in’ (Isaiah 40:22). So as vast as the universe appears to be, it’s not nearly as awesome as our great God, who created it for His own pleasure and purpose.”⁵

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From Colossians Chapter 1 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. [v.15-17]

Omid Safi is Director of Duke University’s Center for Islamic Studies. Here is part of one of his reflections:

According to Jewish and Christian beliefs, the most incredible thing about the Creator is that he cares about us, the people he created—you and me. He didn’t craft the universe in order to make us feel insignificant. He did it to display his power and show us his infinite love.

We have no idea, truly, of the vastness of the universe. The portion of the universe that we know about – what we can see and sense – bewilders, baffles, and humbles the imagination. Instead of miles and kilometers, we measure it in the speed of light.

Light takes eight minutes to get to us from the sun. In other words, the sunshine we can see *now* departed the sun eight minutes ago. We measure the distance between stars in how many *years* light needs to travel.... We as humans drive 60 or 70 miles per hour; light travels 186,000 miles *per second*.

The very closest star to our solar system, Alpha Centauri, would take 4.3 years to travel to at the speed of light. I let that sink in to my own heart.

I encourage you to view two illustrations on the NASA website at

https://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/hubble/science/xdp.html

The second photo with the Moon superimposed for perspective shows a small portion of the sky visible by the naked eye. Notice the tiny box in the center of the photo. That is an area studied intently by the Hubble telescope’s eXtreme Deep Field program. Go back to the first photo on the website’s page. This is what the Hubble telescope could see in that small patch of sky that you and I cannot: not innumerable stars, but countless galaxies. Remember that image as Professor Safi continues his remarks:

And then for the wow factor, I lift up my head to heights I cannot even fathom. The visible universe contains 10,000 billion galaxies. Each one of these galaxies contains about 100 billion stars.

Imagine each star being a grain of sand. There are more stars in the portion of the known universe than there are grains of sand on Earth.

And yet vastness is not the same as significance. If it were just vastness, bigness, largeness, transcendence, then our lives would seem insignificant.⁶

Author Shane Larson asks us to

Consider: in just ten drops of water, splashed on your window in a summer rainstorm, there are as many molecules of water as there are stars in the entire Universe. You have heard that every one of us is made of 50%-60% water. Which means there are 100,000 times more molecules of water in your body than there are stars in the entire Universe.

And every molecule of water has two atoms of hydrogen, which is what the stars are made of. And the other atom in every molecule of water is oxygen, which was made by stars, burning hydrogen. At the end of their lives, those stars exploded and threw all that they were back out into the Cosmos to eventually become all that you and I are.

In a very real way, **you** are atoms the Universe has assembled to look at itself. You are atoms that have been organized to look out into the Cosmos and ask the question, “*What’s the deal with all those other atoms?*” ...*Where did we come from? Where are we going? Why are we here? And what is our role to play in the enormous universe all around us?*

⁵ “Grasping the Vastness of Our Universe,” posted on Aug 5, 2006 by the United Church of God in their online journal *Good News* at <https://www.ucg.org/the-good-news/grasping-the-vastness-of-our-universe>, accessed 2/14/2017

⁶ “Vastness of the Universe, Greatness of the Human” by Omid Safi at <http://www.onbeing.org/blog/vastness-of-the-universe-greatness-of-the-human/>, accessed 2/14/2017

We're not different than all those other galaxies, than all those other stars, than all those other grains of sand. We're all made of the same star stuff....

It's okay to feel small. We are small, so we should be humble. We don't know all there is to know about the Universe. But be noble, because *you are made of the stars*.... We're just trying to understand what our place in the Cosmos really is.⁷

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From Psalm 139 ¹ LORD, you have examined me. You know me. ² You know when I sit down and when I stand up. Even from far away, you comprehend my plans. ³ You study my traveling and resting. You are thoroughly familiar with all my ways. ⁴ There isn't a word on my tongue, LORD, that you don't already know completely. ⁵ You surround me – front and back. You put your hand on me. ⁶ That kind of knowledge is too much for me; it's so high above me that I can't fathom it. ⁷ Where could I go to get away from your spirit? Where could I go to escape your presence? ⁸ If I went up to heaven, you would be there. If I went down to the grave, you would be there too! ⁹ If I could fly on the wings of dawn, stopping to rest only on the far side of the ocean – ¹⁰ even there your hand would guide me; even there your strong hand would hold me tight! ¹¹ If I said, "The darkness will definitely hide me; the light will become night around me," ¹² even then the darkness isn't too dark for you! Nighttime would shine bright as day, because darkness is the same as light to you! ¹³ You are the one who created my innermost parts; you knit me together while I was still in my mother's womb. ¹⁴ I give thanks to you that I was marvelously set apart. Your works are wonderful – I know that very well. ¹⁵ My bones weren't hidden from you when I was being put together in a secret place, when I was being woven together in the deep parts of the earth. ¹⁶ Your eyes saw my embryo, and on your scroll every day was written that was being formed for me, before any one of them had yet happened. ¹⁷ God, your plans are incomprehensible to me! Their total number is countless! ¹⁸ If I tried to count them – they outnumber grains of sand! If I came to the very end – I'd still be with you. [Common English Bible]

Essayist Andy Ramos has wondered about the size of God. He writes:

He is a God powerful enough to create worlds, yet detailed and thoughtful enough to knit us each together in our mothers' wombs. He is intimately involved in even the tiniest aspect of creating life.

So how big is God, exactly? He is so huge that he is not bound by time or space, not needing or wanting for anything, and capable of creating our entire universe. Yet he is personal enough to have created us in his own image. Biblical literature teaches that we are fearfully and wonderfully made under God's watchful care, that God even knows the number of hairs on each head.

With all of this, it is amazing to consider that God, the Creator of the cosmos, wants to have a personal relationship with each one of us.⁸

That relationship which we know through Jesus was, of course, instituted by God before the Holy Birth. Listen to these familiar words from the prophet Jeremiah.

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From Jeremiah Chapter 31 ³¹ The Lord says, "The time is coming when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. ³² It will not be like the old covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and led them out of Egypt. Although I was like a husband to them, they did not keep that covenant. ³³ The new covenant that I will make with the people of Israel will be this: I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ³⁴ None of them will have to teach a neighbor to know the Lord, because all will know me, from the least to the greatest. I will forgive their sins and I will no longer remember their wrongs. I, the Lord, have spoken." [v.31-34 GNT]

Let us close with a quote which, though anonymous, has gained popularity thanks to Instagram and Pinterest and Tumblr and other creative internet venues.

"Look at the stars. It won't fix the economy. It won't stop wars. It won't give you flat abs, or even help you figure out your relationship. But [look at the stars –] it's important. It helps you to remember that you and your problems are both infinitesimally small and conversely, that you are a piece of an amazing and vast universe."⁹

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⁷ "Feeling Small in a Big Cosmos 03: Proverbs," posted on July 20, 2015 by Shane L. Larson at <https://writescience.wordpress.com/tag/pale-blue-dot/>, accessed 2/17/2017

⁸ "How Big Is God?" by Andy Ramos at <https://www.exploregod.com/how-big-is-god>, accessed 2/14/2017

⁹ <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/vastness>, accessed 2/14/2017