

Grace and peace to you all from Emmanuel – God with us – Amen.

A year ago, on Christmas Day, the James Webb Space Telescope launched into outer space. The images it returned made the news this summer – images that show the birth of stars, galaxies never before seen, and – incredibly – what the universe looked like back when the earth and sun were formed over 13.4 billion years ago.

From ancient times, we have peered into the skies seeking to understand the magnitude of God’s handiwork, to see God in the world around us. Researchers have found cave art dating from the Paleolithic and Neolithic eras suggesting early humans’ use and understanding of complex astronomy. Even King David could not escape this fascination as he penned Psalm 19’s opening verse: “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims their handiwork” (Psalm 19:1, ESV).

This quest has led theologians and scientists alike to peer into the skies for clues to help them build and support theories of the cosmos. So, following this great tradition of scientific and theological inquiry, the James Webb Space Telescope images provide us with the latest window into God’s creative masterpiece.

One of the telescope’s most striking pictures reveals a closer look at the so-called “Pillars of Creation” – giant fingers of gas and dust (larger than our solar system) that birth new stars even as they evaporate. This phenomenon is named after a sermon by Charles Spurgeon from 1857: “And now wonder, ye angels,” Spurgeon says of Christ’s birth, “the Infinite has become an infant; he, upon whose shoulders the universe doth hang, hangs at his mother’s breast; He who created all things, and bears up the pillars of creation, hath now become so weak...”

This is the tension we hold in the Christmas Story: That the God of all things, seen and unseen, came to be with us here on earth. Choosing to be born not in a palace or amongst the mighty, but to an unwed Jewish mother, a teenager far away from home, with only a manger and bands of cloth to hold the one who holds us all.

Christ comes to us as a vulnerable child, embedded within human life and this vulnerable creation in need of our care, protection, and community.

Indeed, members of the wider community came quickly to welcome the newborn Christ. The first witnesses invited to attend the manger were shepherds. Out of the darkness, a chorus of angels appeared to them in their fields, encouraging them to go and see. The Glory of God shone around them on an otherwise average night. Luke says that they were understandably *terrified*.

We know what it means to feel the fear and weakness of humanity. To feel afraid in the presence of things too big for us to hold:

The uncertainty of a world where disease and sickness seem to be ever at our front door, bending our already beleaguered healthcare system beneath its load.

The brokenness we might feel in our relationships; the connections we're trying to mend. The awkwardness and thrill of gathering after years apart.

The uncertainty we feel with the rising costs of living, shortages, and unemployment.

And the instability of our global community with ongoing wars, environmental disasters, and civil unrest that call us to wonder if the promised peace of Christ will ever come to rest among us.

Sometimes it seems like the more we look out into the world, the more suffering we see. Like when we look up at the sky, the smaller we feel.

We know what it means to have doubt and to question and to wonder at our place in all of this, because the more we seem to learn, the more we come to discover just how vast creation is; how it's always expanding, but also always eroding. How the depths of the universe in the midst of the midnight sky continue to birth creation by God's power...even as we continue to spin around our own sun.

This is what the Christmas story teaches us, too, in a story built around nighttime revelation: In the midst of divine creation, chaos, vulnerability, and fear – there might be hope, joy, and peace renewed for all of us.

For God chose even in their vast nature to be with us.

To be in solidarity with creation. To be in community, even and especially within the depths of our weakness, suffering and pain. To bring hope in the midst of unlikely and lowly conditions.

The first human launched into space – the Russian cosmonaut Yury (*Ga – gar – in*) Gagarin – was reported to have returned to Earth and said, “I looked and looked and looked, but I didn't see God.” Though this statement doesn't appear in any transcript, the sentiment sticks.

Sometimes we fail to see God where and when we want.

Sometimes it seems like God isn't where we would expect God to be.

But Christ calls to us from the manger long ago, from the least likely of places, through the wisdom of scientists, elders and knowledge keepers, through our youth, and those generations yet to be born – that we might awaken to God's call to dwell with and even to *be* Emmanuel – God with us – in caring for creation.

In providing spaces of care and community for anyone in need.

In realizing the divine vulnerability and creative power of each and every created life.

In mourning and grieving the loss of loved ones, desolated landscapes and even endangered species.

In clinging to hope that the seeds we planted in the rich darkness of soil will rest until they are ready to spring forth in renewed life.

In faith filled hope that God in Christ is still abiding with us today.

In all these ways, we are united with Christ across all of creation. A God who is with us - in and through all things. Ever working alongside us to bring to balance the needs of every living thing. Inviting us, as the shepherds long ago, to come to bear witness to Emmanuel – God’s greatest hope for the renewal of us all.

And may this be so among us - Amen.