

## SLIDE – MILKY WAY

Some years ago my family went to the Science Museum of Minnesota to watch a film on the Hubble Telescope. The Hubble was the first space observatory designed to be maintained and refurbished in orbit. Launched in 1990, Hubble's discoveries have transformed the way scientists look at the universe. The Hubble Telescope's ability to show the universe in unprecedented detail has turned astronomical conjectures into concrete certainties. It has encouraged new research.

## SLIDE – APACHE OBSERVATORY

In a report of January 2017 in *Science and Astronomy*, one of those projects is a survey of 150,000 stars of our galaxy, the Milky Way. The goal was to find what humans and stars have in common. Through the use of a spectrograph in New Mexico at the Apache Point Observatory, the dust in the Milky Way was examined. Astronomers used spectroscopy to measure elements because each one emits distinct wavelengths of light from within a star. They measured the depth of the dark and bright patches in each star's light spectrum to determine what it is made of.

## SLIDE-BASIC ELEMENTS OF LIFE

The results showed that the crucial elements for life on Planet Earth, called the building blocks for life, CHNOPS, were indeed present in the dust of the stars. These elements, CHNOPS, are carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, oxygen, phosphorus, and sulfur. Astronomers were able to catalog the abundance of these elements in a huge sampling of stars.

Although humans share most elements with the stars, the proportions of those elements differ between humans and stars. For example, humans are about 65% oxygen by mass, whereas oxygen makes up less than 1% of all elements measured in space. The overall impact of the study was to "allow scientists to place constraints on when and where in our galaxy life had the required elements to evolve, a sort of "temporal galactic habitable zone" said Jennifer Johnson, science chairperson of the survey and professor at Ohio State University.

#### SLIDE – LIGHT CREATED

The creation of Planet Earth with CHNOPS took place rather slowly. We sometimes don't realize the impact of this as we too often think that this present day is all there is. We think the experience of this day is a really big deal. And it is good to live as fully as you can in the moment. But consider the beginnings of Planet Earth which occurred 13-14 billion years ago. And then consider that human life has been around for only a fraction of a percent of the time the earth has existed. Creation itself moved towards human life but very slowly.

We heard the creation story in Genesis chapter 1 tonight and the faith story describes seven days. But even the scriptures later in New Testament times remind us that "with the Lord one day is a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." Since that was written in ancient times according to human standards, we might consider an adjustment to the translation, "with the Lord one day is a billion years, and a billion years as one day." That is a huge thought to wrap your mind around. But what I believe to be true is that creation has been moving towards human life. We are creatures who are created in the image of God and who by the grace of God are capable of living with a heart like God's.

#### SLIDE – ASHEN CROSS

Today you will hear these words spoken to you, *Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return*. Yes, we are dust. We are earthly dust and part of God's good creation. Dust is good. The dust we will use tonight is the crushed ashes of burnt palm branches from Palm Sunday. Ashes are the residue left after something has burned. They remind us of the vulnerability in life. Jesus' vulnerability is near in this dust. It is demonstrated in the he is subject to time on earth, to human flesh, to the forces of temptations of the devil, and to the burden of human sin.

When we see ashes on this day we are reminded of our own vulnerability in life. There are life cycles which are natural to our being such as birth and death, living and dying. One end of the life cycle is as natural as the other in that we all are born and we all die. Life can be tenuous at the beginning. The end of life can come as a shock or be something that is feared. Overall we live in this life which is larger than ourselves.

Today as we hear these words, *Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return*, we are also aware that we are earthly dust, springing forth from a multi-billion year holy adventure. We believe that God has created us and all that exists. So dust is good. Ashes are good. It is from the soil that we are created, as it says in Genesis 2.7, *the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground,...and out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air*, Genesis 2:19.

#### SLIDE – STAR DUST

When we saw the film on the Hubble Telescope they talked about how galaxies and solar systems are formed. They said there is much more to this universe than we have ever imagined. And that it is quite possible that we are intergalactic star dust gathered together by the forces of gravity and then shaped ever so slowly over long periods of time. The study in Science and Astronomy seemed to confirm this.

God's time is a gift of creation. This long time of shaping through many and various processes is part of God's holy, creative adventure. Perhaps we should say, *Remember that you are star dust, and to the dust of the universe you shall return*. Remember that all of us are born, and all die in similar fashion. No one escapes these realities. Remember that we are absolutely dependent on God's mercy and grace. Any faith that we can claim is a gift from God. Lent is the perfect time to watch for growth in faith.

This is a new day we are living in. It's different than last year. We are in a different place. Yet we are people longing to have a heart like God's. We read from Matthew 6 today and realize we are hearing Jesus teach his disciples what it means to be his and how to follow him. The kingdom he is leading is to be seen and known. How are we to understand, then, these words which talk about keeping things hidden?

#### SLIDE-PERPLEXED BOY

Dietrich Bonhoeffer addressed this mystery of the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing. He said *disciples should "keep on following Jesus, and should keep looking forward to him who is going before them, but not at themselves and what they are doing. In this way the righteousness of the disciples is hidden from*

*themselves.*” They are so focused on Jesus that they are not looking at themselves nor obsessing on what others think of them, either.

Of course this is much harder to do than it is to describe. I think that is why it is helpful that we return to the season of Lent each year. In Lent we are encouraged to read and study the scripture. In Lent we are encouraged to learn to pray. We are encouraged to enter into community. The word, prayer and consolation, and brothers and sisters in Christ can help us to keep our focus on Christ. These things help us to focus on what God through Christ has given us. These practices act like building blocks which make for life for us over time.

Because God has given us time, time in which creation itself was formed, and time now in which we exhaust our days with acts of mercy towards others, we can see how our habits take shape. Reveling in God’s promises we are transformed into salt and light for the world. We have been given the gift of time so that we might seek to be reconciled to God and to one another.

#### SLIDE – HABITS OF FAITH

Aristotle said that the just or righteous person has a set of knowledge about what they do, and what they do is because of who they are as a just person, and they must do it in a confident manner with a personal character to match. Being good is more than knowing what is right it is having the habits of a righteous person. Jesus gives us what we need. And the return to the season of Lent allows us to enter again into a time of building habits which make for life.