

1

I've always enjoyed looking up at the stars. From the Christmas gift telescope I received as a child, to an 8" Dobsonian telescope I purchased six years ago, I enjoy looking up. When my children were young, I would point out the constellations in the sky, from the Big Dipper to Orion to Cassiopeia, along with the star cluster Pleiades. With my telescope I enjoy looking at clusters of stars, the Andromeda Galaxy, craters on the moon, the moons of Jupiter, and rings of Saturn. I was in awe the first time I saw the phases of Venus, similar to the phases our moon goes through in relation to sunlight hitting its surface.

When I take time to stop and look up, I'm in awe of the vastness of creation, a universe larger than I can even imagine. As I gaze into the night sky, many times I wonder... is anybody looking back at us from a distant planet and wondering about our possible existence? Have you ever wondered if life exists in the universe other than on our planet?

So far, over 4000 planets have been confirmed, with one study seven years ago suggesting that in our Milky Way Galaxy, 100 billion planets could

exist around other stars.¹ Last week researchers suggested that in our galaxy, there could be 30 intelligent civilizations.² That's not even taking into account the 100 billion galaxies in the universe, which could also contain countless forms of life!³

That leaves me with a sense of awe...mystery ...wonder. In the midst of the vastness of the universe, how do we connect to the Divine nature of God? The writers of many psalms in the Bible also had a sense of awe about God's creation, as we heard in Psalm 147 last week when the psalmist offered praise for clouds and rain, grass and herbs. Psalm 135 praises God for clouds, lightning, and rain, while also saying: "Alleluia, praise God's name, those who stand in the house of God, in the courts of God's house."

Wouldn't that be nice? To stand in the house of God? In the inner court of our sanctuary? Not only does the nighttime sky provide an opportunity to sense God's awesomeness, sitting in the house of God can provide a comforting sense of God's presence. Although we realized we must create some distance to ensure safety during this

2

pandemic, we still lament not being in our sanctuary. I give thanks that we have found new ways to offer our praise through various technologies. Some of us, however, may still be frustrated that we can't do things the way we have before, which the psalmist warns us about even though writing thousands of years ago.

The psalmist's context was different, of course, for he was not facing a coronavirus, but the writer warned against the danger of allowing anything to get in the way of worshiping God. In his case, the danger was wooden idols that neighboring groups used. The writer warned:

¹⁵ Idols of silver and gold
are made and worshiped
in other nations.

¹⁶ They have a mouth and eyes,
but they can't speak or see.

¹⁷ They are completely deaf,
and they can't breathe. (Psalm 135:15-17 CEV)

Rather than focusing on God, some placed their hope in wooden statues that took their eyes off the wonder and mystery of God's beauty.

Many artists throughout history have made sacred objects that point us toward God, that inspire us to look beyond their work to sense God's mystery. Paintings...sculptures...architecture...music...drama...gardens. Name some of those artistic expressions that help you sense God's presence...

It's wonderful when these expressions direct our gaze to God, but taking any of them as a substitute for God, however, leaves us feeling empty, longing for something more. When these expressions become idols, they distract us from focusing on God. Even our sanctuaries can become idols when we begin to believe that's the only place we can worship. When the building itself becomes our focus, we have lost sight of God and have turned our buildings into idols made of brick and stone.

As the coronavirus began to spread, I wondered: how can we turn this tragedy into a time to draw closer to God? How might we take time to sense God's presence among us with this different pattern of life? As I've talked with folks over the past several

months, that's what I'm hearing that many of you have experienced—a different, yet closer, connection to God. Even though this virus has distanced us from one another, ironically it has also helped some to draw closer to God, and in some ways, has strengthen the ties within our churches. Some have told me of the phone calls or notes you send or receive...of more time with family...or space to be outside and enjoy God's creation.

It's sometimes during the difficult times of life that we find ourselves mysteriously drawing closer to God, something that John of the Cross recognized as he wrote about what he called *la noche oscura*, often translated as “the dark night” or “obscure night.” This sixteenth century Spanish poet and spiritual guide wrote about how God guides us and shapes us during times that seem obscure, confusing, and yet, we can draw closer to Christ in the chaos.

John of the Cross pointed to three factors present in the dark night experience: “first, a sense of dryness in one's spiritual life; second, a difficult time praying in one's usual way, sometimes even an

inability to pray; and third, a growing desire to be alone in loving awareness of God.”⁴ We're often hesitant to admit to others when we experience these obscure times, fearing they will tell us to “have faith” or “try harder.”

Think of those times when it's been hard to pray...when you felt disconnected from God...when life seemed out of control. Maybe even...now...is that time.

We all enter those times when we're not sure what to do while in chaos, as one teacher was wondering how to discuss with her young children.

The kindergarten Sunday school class was learning about how God cares for us in times of trouble. The teacher asked the class to draw pictures of things that make them afraid. After they finished drawing, each child explained to the others what he or she had drawn.

Five-year-old Scott had created in vivid crayon a looming funnel cloud, a car, and a man. He described how the man could not get his car started and a tornado was coming toward him.

“The man really needs to pray, doesn't he?” asked the teacher.

“No,” Scott disagreed. “He needs to run!”⁵

④

In these times when we wonder how to pray or what to do or when to enter our sanctuaries, let us focus on God's wonder around us: the stars, the beauty of a sunset, the songs of birds echoing in the trees, for all of creation serves as God's sanctuary. Sense God's movement in artistic

expressions of painting, music, gardening, drama, writing, baking, pottery, or the many other creative ways we can sense the Divine among us, and then join with the psalmist in shouting, "Alleluia, praise God's name."

¹ www.space.com/19103-milky-way-100-billion-planets.html

² www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2020/06/200615092753.htm

³ www.space.com/25303-how-many-galaxies-are-in-the-universe.html

⁴ Daniel P. Schrock, *The Dark Night*, 2009, 16-17.

⁵ Hodgins, Michael. *1001 More Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers*. Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #722.