

The Webb Telescope and Reality

When the Hubble telescope was launched in 1990 we were told we'd finally see the face of God. Not so much. The newly launched Webb telescope's mirror is 7x's bigger and the overall telescope is 4x's more powerful. This time we'll finally unravel the mystery of creation! Social Media and Scientism (the religion of science as opposed to real science) has gone gaga. Let's talk the Webb telescope and reality.

Color me suspicious. On Monday, last, when the first pictures were released, an NPR story admitted that as with the Hubble telescope the images are colorized. It's an infrared telescope so it sees images on the red spectrum the human eye can't. NASA decides how to color the less red ones. The local NPR station social media editor read something like this from Twitter: "Wow! It looks just like Star Trek pictured!" You don't say. *Imagine* that. The emphasis being on the word imagine.

What if it's *Raiders of the Lost Ark* mixed with John Lennon in reality? What if our imagining these beautiful scenes are on the order of Lennon imaging there's no heaven or hell. "It's easy if you try." Remember the Nazis imagine they have found real treasure in the long lost Ark of the Covenant. And at first it seems they have. They open the Ark, and they see wisps of otherworldly clouds swirling around them; then a beautiful angel face. But that suddenly morphs into the face of death. Reality goes downhill from there. We look into unseen depths of space thinking, at last, we're seeing the face of God. What if it's like Luther admonished: If you see someone climb toward heaven on any other ladder other than Jesus, pull them down before they poke their head in for they will be looking into hell not heaven.

The Scriptural reality is this: things are the opposite of the *exposé* in the Wizard of Oz. There the little old man behind the curtain was able to fake power and might behind his words. In the reality of God's World, there is real power and might and even miracle behind the words of little old men like me. Or do you think the Word of God in Water can work forgiveness of sins, rescue from Death and Devil, and give eternal life, but apart from Water God's spoken Word is inert? Or Jesus' Words "given and shed for thee for forgiveness of sins" can give His Body and Blood for not only forgiveness but life and salvation, but spoken from this pulpit His words are mere human opinion? Remember what happened to the king and 100 of his men who disrespected the Word of the prophet Elijah? Remember what happened to the boys who felt they could ridicule Elisha in a way they couldn't Elijah? Remember the reality of the bears behind his Words? Don't make the mistake of the Corinthians. They thought, "O yea Paul writes powerful stuff but he's really a weakling and his speaking nothing." Paul says, "You'll see what I really am when I present" (2 Cor. 10:9-11).

Color me suspicious when fallen men tell me what reality is when it comes to the face of God. And color me anxious. Since God's Kingdom is supernatural, we think it ought to come near us in ways beyond the ordinary. Certainly not by sending ordinary men! Certainly not as lambs among wolves; at least send dogs! Nope. He sends the first 72 pastors, not apostles, but pastors like me, as lambs among wolves. That's even less than ordinary. That's why Jesus tells them twice: Both among those who accept their ministry and among those who reject it: The kingdom of Heaven is there whether people see it or not whether you recognize it or not. I've always wanted to say in a marriage ceremony: "By the power vested in me by the State of Texas, or wherever I was pastoring, I pronounce you husband and wife." That's impressive; that's power exercised on behalf of a state, but all I get to say is "I pronounce them husband and wife in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." O is that all.

My doubting, let alone denying, the power vested in me by Almighty God for the sake of His people is damnable, but can you at least understand where it comes from? Can you see why I say color me anxious? You see: I've known the rejection these first pastors experience but never have I healed the sick. O have I wanted to. In Detroit confronted by the intractable misery of day to day life in the inner city the Charismatic bravado was tempting. A pastor who had been there for 16 years before I said: "In the suburbs, these sort of things do happen. Here it's every day." Even outside the inner city, I've wanted to heal, to help, but all I have is Words, Water, Bread, and Wine. And when God operates through means, it looks like the Wizard of Oz but without the thunder and awe-inspiring going-ons behind the curtain. When God operates through means He can be doubted and denied with impunity. They did so to all the prophets, apostles, and to Jesus Himself. That's why Jesus says even when His ministry of means is not welcomed: know that the Kingdom of God hasn't failed to be there.

Go home and read Psalm 25. David is trapped, lonely and oppressed by sickness and enemies; he's troubled and distressed, miserable and suffering. What is His prayer? "Forgive all my sins," he says (Ps. 25:15-18). Read the entire Psalm; David does mention sickness, enemies, troubles but again and again he circles back to forgiveness: "Don't remember how I sinned and did wrong when I was young" (7), He prays. And then, "Glorify Your name, O Lord, and forgive my sin – it is great" (11). This is like the healing of the paralytic when Jesus forgives the man's sins rather than heal him. And the fact that Jesus left the man unhealed didn't bother His enemies as much as the fact that the Man Jesus forgave sins as only God could. Then for the sake of proving He had the authority and power to forgive, Jesus healed the man. Get it? The physical miracle was only to prove the much more important spiritual reality of forgiveness coming from the mouth of a Man.

If we could see the reality of applying the forgiveness Christ won on Calvary in 30 AD today, we'd be blown away. If we could see the reality of His Body and Blood coursing through the body and blood of sinners to bring forgiveness, life today, and salvation forever, we'd faint. If Baptismal Water approached us like that wave at the beach that grows and

grows as it comes at you and breaks with great power and noise on top of you, well we'd all kneel when a Baptism takes place.

Color me suspicious, anxious, *and* color me *gobsmacked*. You know the scene where the superhero has lost his superpowers and says a command and nothing happens or a gun is fired at the bad guy with an audible empty chamber 'click'? Well that doesn't happen here. Whether I Baptize, Absolve, or Commune, it never happens that the Old Adam isn't drowned with all sins and evil desires. It never happens that a sin I've forgiven remains before God in heaven. It never happens that I say "take eat, take drink" and you get just bread and wine. But these Miracles don't look like anything. But what does Jesus say about being rejected by a town even one where they'd do no miracles? He says The NT ministry that was rejected even when He walked the earth visibly would've caused that OT stronghold of unbelief, Sodom, to repent. It's true; the verses left out of our reading tell of 4 towns that would've repented in sackcloth and ashes if they had seen the miracles done by Jesus. But Jonah did no miracle in Nineveh. Only his preaching of repentance led to their repenting in sackcloth and ashes.

The first pastors were overjoyed that they could see demons submitting to their ministry. I've see the demons of sadness, grief, guilt, and fear subject to the NT miracles of Word and Sacrament. I've seen people in the midst of pain, grief, illness, and tragedy declare their thanks to God in Christ for sustaining them. But Jesus says it's not just Satan's minions that are subject to the NT ministry but Satan himself is. He's cast out of heaven at every Baptism, Absolution, and Communion in Jesus' name. For Jesus' sake Satan can't accuse you before God. He hasn't one of your sins to wave before God and say: what about this? He has no claim on even an ounce of your flesh let alone a pound for you to pay. Jesus paid in full and more.

But see what Jesus does? See how Jesus leaves us openmouthed and blown away, i.e. gobsmacked? I'm left awestruck, dumbfounded, taken-aback, amazed and freaked-out by the way Jesus turns it around. It's not the power of the ordinary NT ministry that is so worthy of rejoicing, not that even spirits holy and unholy are subject to it: But that your name has forever been inscribed in heaven. That's what Jesus tells the first 72 pastors. That really grounds us pastors. We have a holy ministry, a divine office, that works powerful, impressive things to "overcome all the power of the enemy", yet that's not where our joy is to come from. It's to come from the fact that our names have been recorded in heaven. The Message paraphrase of this catches the truth: "Not what you do for God but what God does for you - that's the agenda for rejoicing." And do you think Christ has done any less for you? Nope. In His name, for His sake, in His very blood, your names have been registered, recorded, inscribed in heaven.

Unbelief uses the vast reaches and impenetrable darkness of space to fill in whatever blanks they'd like. Both a pre-Darwin essayist (Hazlitt) and a post-Darwin philosopher (George Dawson) realized this; the latter saying, "'In the days of Jacob there was a ladder between heaven and earth; but now the heavens have gone further off and have become astronomical'" (*1,000 New Ill.*, 282). In his 1528 lectures on 1 Timothy Luther comments on 1 Tim. 6:16: God "lives in unapproachable light". Luther says, "Beyond the creatures of this world, we consider, is utter darkness. Paul, however, says, 'Where we set up darkness, there is an unapproachable light'" (LW, 28, 377-8). Regardless if there are beauties or horrors beyond our imagining in the depths of space: the reality is that the true God is there who rules all things in Christ for the sake of His Body, the Church. Jesus tells us in John 1 that He is the Ladder between heaven and earth. And ascending on Him we confidently poke our head in, and as the hymn says, "find our heaven of heavens in Thee" (TLH, 213). Amen

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