

GRASPING THE HOLY, THE SACRED, THE WONDER...

Our understandings of God and the majesty of creation are constantly expanding.

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Through history, humankind has been grasped by a sense of the holy, the sacred, as we gaze in awe at the majesty of creation. I feel connected with all who have gone before me as I pause to drink in the beauty of sunrises, sunsets, or the glory of the changing seasons on forest vistas of mountain and valley.

It's a time to pause from the busyness of daily life and responsibilities. A time to wonder about who and what is the source of such an incredible, continuous dance of life. A time to wonder about our place in it all.

I have felt some of what Moses might have felt, that I was standing on holy ground (Exodus 3:5) as I

gazed through the morning mist at the sun shining on the layers of cliff walls at the Grand Canyon. I have marveled at 750,000-gallons-per-second water rushing over Niagara Falls. And I wonder—how is it possible for that much water to be replenished continually from rivers and lakes, so that over more than 12,000 years the water just keeps coming?

Growing up in a metropolitan city with electric lights everywhere, the night sky seemed unremarkable. It was just dark (and often cold). It in no way compared to a later experience, several hours from any city, of lying under a majestic canopy of millions of bright stars within a background of black

velvet.

The beauty was almost more than I could take in. The stars seemed close enough to touch. One definition of prayer is awakening to the sacrament of the present moment. It was an experience of wordless prayer, great awe, wonder, and connection with the eternal.

As we recreate Advent each year, I think of the story of angels appearing to shepherds “keeping watch over their flock by night” (Luke 2:8 NRSV). I have been taught that shepherds were chosen for this sacred experience to show that Christ comes first to the poor and humble.

It’s a good lesson. I used to think of those shepherds as being poor, lonely, and cold, sitting on a dark, boring hillside. Now I find myself wondering if they were resting wakefully, night after night, under that breathtaking canopy of stars, feeling a sacred connection with all that is. Was the gospel writer also saying that the Spirit of God is closer to us when we step away from the comfort and insulation of the walls we live behind to immerse ourselves in the beauty of creation?

As we gaze with eyes of wonder at this world and the heavens, we naturally want to understand who or what created and sustains them, and how we should live our lives. History is full of various answers to those questions, with some agreement and lots of disagreement. Christian history sometimes seems to be a long line of scholars and theologians arguing about who was right and who was wrong, then shutting each other out. So today there are thousands of denominations within the Christian church alone. There are many definitions of who or what God is, each specifying boundaries or borders of what God can and cannot be.

In laying out his proof for the existence of God, eleventh-century theologian Anselm said: “God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived.” I doubt I’m understanding it the way Anselm intended, but it’s a statement that has intrigued me and stirred my imagination. No matter how I define God, if I can imagine something greater, then I need to release my old limitations.

I find myself continually needing to let go of the boxes I’ve created around God, the limitations I’ve put on what can’t be limited or defined. The past sixty years of space travel and increasingly powerful telescopes, reaching farther all the time, have brought many new insights into this universe we’re a tiny part of. I was a teenager the first time anyone, anywhere, saw a picture of Earth from space. I didn’t realize it until later, but that picture stirred within me a bigger picture of God.

Recently, the James Webb Space Telescope sent us pictures of the incredible beauty and immense size of creation. Scientists tell us the pictures show the

existence of billions of galaxies, most of which have billions of stars, and many of those stars have planets in orbit.

My mind struggles to take in the unimaginable size and complexity of this universe, and I find myself realizing I again need a bigger box around my understanding of God.

It’s mathematically improbable, if not impossible, for this to be the only planet with life. I find myself realizing I again need a bigger box around my understanding of what our place is within this creation.

In recent seminary courses, our professor, Zac Harmon-McLaughlin, often has said that the more he learns, the more he realizes that all he truly knows for certain about God is that “God is God, and I am not.” Perhaps it’s more important to fully experience the sacred wonder of all that is, to nurture and live within a sense of connection with all of creation, than to define boundaries and rules that always will be found inadequate.

In his book, *Canoeing the Mountains*, Tod Bolsinger says:

We protect what we cherish. Love drives us to hold on to what is dear and cling to what gives us meaning and life. But it is also because of love that we are willing to change.

We’re in a time of environmental and climate crises, with increasing awareness of economic, political, racial, and cultural conflicts all around us. As we search for our way through it all, may we return to an attitude of wonder, of cherishing, of love and gratitude that open our eyes and hearts to “that than which nothing greater can be conceived.”

Gloria! In excelsis Deo!

