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Sermon preached at Redeemer Lutheran Church, Bangor, ME
January 4, 2015—2nd Sunday after Christmas
Texts: Ephesians 1:3-14, John 1:1-18

Zooming Out to Big Questions, and Seeing How God's Love "Zooms In" to Us

Part 1: A "visual" offered during Children's Time

Last spring a remarkable TV show aired, called *Cosmos, a Space Time Odyssey*. You may have seen it or the 1980s version of *Cosmos* by Carl Sagan. This one was hosted by astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson, and it began by noting our "address" in the universe. When we mail a letter we use our street address, starting with our particular house or apartment number. But you know how you can "zoom out" on maps as they show bigger and bigger areas? Our address "zooms out" to name our town, and then our state. That's enough for the U.S. Mail to find us. But our cosmic address would include not only our region, New England, and our country, the United States, but then our planet, Earth, and our solar system, the Milky Way Galaxy, and then the location of the Milky Way, called the Local Group, which is in the Virgo Super Cluster, which is in the universe, which is so unimaginably big it makes your head spin.

I bring this up because two of our readings today also "zoom out" to bring us to that head-spinning place where we consider how big God has to be, to infuse the whole universe with love from the beginning of creation to the end of time. Not only that, but also how amazing it is that that love is not only universal but also particular. God zooms in! God *became* flesh. Jesus was God incarnate, a particular person in a particular place on this planet at a particular time. God *loves* people in the flesh. Human beings like us: particular people in this place and time.

So with that zoomed-out image of our particular place in the infinite universe, and the zoomed-in love of God, I just wanted to start our heads spinning as our readings speak to us today...

Part 2

Today was supposed to be a lot of things. It's the new year, which can be energizing for new projects and new opportunities. But a snowstorm slows down that kind of energy. Today was supposed to be First Sunday Faith Formation for all the kids at 9:15, but we cancelled that based on the weather forecast. It was supposed to be the kickoff for our stewardship campaign, but when you know attendance is going to be light, it's hard to get revved up for a grand beginning that involves the whole congregation.

So maybe we can't forge ahead with new energy or large gatherings or grand beginnings. Maybe it's still time for staying cozy and letting the good news of Christmas sink in a little more deeply. Maybe it's the perfect day to linger in the season of Christmas and hear the invitation from our Ephesians and John readings today.

The authors of John's gospel and Ephesians are doing some remarkable pondering here, and they invite us to join them. This is pondering on a cosmic level. Ephesians talks about "heavenly realms" and "the foundation of the world," "the mystery of God's will" and "a plan for the fullness of time." John goes back to the very beginning of everything, to God's Word in creation and his presence in life and the light that is never overcome by darkness.

This is pondering of the big picture, the biggest we can imagine. With a 21st-century view of the universe, the picture we have is even bigger than these two authors imagined. But for them as well as for us, it's the bigness of the picture that makes the miracle of Christmas both so amazing, and so necessary.

Let me say that again in another way: **The immensity of the universe and the infinity of God make the incarnation both really amazing, and absolutely necessary.** Fifty years ago Karl Rahner expressed this in a prayer called "God of My Lord Jesus Christ." Rahner was a Jesuit Catholic theologian who published this prayer in his book, *Encounters with Silence*.¹ His prayer considers first the infinity of God—the biggest picture of all—and then how God has become finite flesh in Jesus. His pondering helps us meditate on John and Ephesians today.

Rahner begins with an awareness of how big God is, how God contains everything at once:

You are the Infinite, my God, the Limitless Being. Everything that is and can be is eternally present to You. Whatever I come to know has had its home in Your Mind from all eternity...You are Wisdom, Power, Goodness, Life, and Strength. You are everything I can ever long for or imagine.

But how can You be all those things together?...

You are all in all, and in everything that You are, You are all.

As Rahner keeps thinking about the Infinite God who is everything all at once, he gets anxious.

You are always the Infinite Unity of all reality, whether Your Power or Your Goodness, Your Justice or Your Mercy are revealed in me. But precisely because You are the one Infinity of all being and will always remain so no matter how You manifest Yourself, I am left in agonizing uncertainty. Whenever I think of Your Infinity, I am racked with anxiety, wondering how You are disposed toward me.

When I try to take You into account in the calculations of my life, I can only put You down as an 'unknown'—the riddle of Your Infinity, which Itself contains everything, throws all my calculations off, and so the end result is still an insoluble puzzle.

¹ Translated by James M. Demske, S.J. Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1966. You can find the whole book and this essay (pages 11-17) at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/146427491/Encounters-With-Silence-Karl-Rahner#scribd>

Rahner wonders how the infinite God is “disposed toward” him. Is God benevolent or tolerant or angry or impatient or disinterested or loving or...? It reminds me of what Albert Einstein said was the most important question: “Is the universe a friendly place or not?” As Rahner continues to ponder, the incarnation becomes his source of comfort and assurance.

Lord, You must speak to me in a word that does not mean everything at once, a word that does not embrace the whole of reality in one unfathomable unity. You must say a word to me that means just one thing, one thing which is not everything. You must make Your infinite word finite, if I am to be spared this feeling of terror at Your Infinity.

You must adapt Your word to my smallness, so that it can enter into the tiny dwelling of my finiteness—the only dwelling in which I can live—without destroying it.... You must make Your own some human word, for that’s the only kind I can comprehend. Don’t tell me everything that You are; don’t tell me of Your Infinity—just say that You love me, just tell me of Your Goodness to me. But don’t say this in Your divine language, in which Your Love also means Your inexorable Justice and Your crushing Power—say it rather in *my* language, so I won’t have to be afraid that the word *love* hides some significance other than Your Goodness and gentle Mercy.

And that is exactly what Jesus does. He “zooms in” to speak God’s infinite love in our language. Rahner continues:

O Infinite God, you have actually willed to speak such a word to me! You have restrained the ocean of Your Infinity from flooding in over the poor little wall which protects my tiny life’s-acre from Your Vastness. Not the waters of your great sea, but only the dew of Your Gentleness is to spread itself over my poor little plot of earth. You have come to me in a human word. For You, the Infinite, are the God of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

He has spoken to us in human language. No more can the word love mean anything that I must fear. For when He says that He loves us, and that in Him You love us, this word comes from a human heart. And to a human heart this word has only one meaning, only one blessed and blissful meaning. If this human heart loves us, the heart of Your Son, the heart which...is finite like my own poor heart, then my heart is at peace. For it loves me, and I know that such a love is only love and nothing else.

In other words, “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.” That’s how John’s gospel says it. If you want to know God, and to know whether God is “disposed toward” you in love, just look at Jesus. In his birth, his teaching, his death on a cross, and his resurrection to new life, he speaks and shows God’s love in human terms.

In Jesus the infinite God comes to live with us. Now what? Tomorrow is the 12th day of Christmas. This snow will disappear, and soon we will return to our regularly scheduled program of new year’s resolutions and activities and yes, a stewardship campaign. What

difference does it make to all of those things, to know that God loves us in particular and dwells with us, right here at our address, in Jesus?

That's a good question to meditate on. For new year's, The Bangor Daily News published the questions they thought were most relevant to the coming year. They wrote, "Journalists aren't great at prognostication. So, instead of predicting what storylines to watch in 2015, we offer the following questions to answer over the next 12 months." Pastors aren't great at telling the future either, so I offer a few questions to ponder, if not answer. There's the first one: **What difference does it make to our daily living, to know that God loves us in particular and dwells with us, right here at our address, in Jesus?**

When we stay connected to the big picture of God's universal love that mysteriously and wonderfully also loves each of us in particular, we don't need to spend our energy earning love or fearing we might lose it. We are loved, period! **What could we do instead with all that energy we can save?** Or, as my seminary professor used to say, what do you *want* to do, now that you don't *have* to do anything to be saved?

That's a stewardship question. What do you want to do with your life, your brief and wondrous time alive on this planet? **How will you use and enjoy this precious and finite gift?** In other words, how will you steward it? That's a zoomed-out question, the big picture of our existence. But we need to zoom in too, which is what a stewardship campaign invites us to do. Think of it like the cosmic address, zooming in from the biggest question of your whole life. Then zoom in to ask, in this new year, **how will you use and enjoy the particular resources you've been given:** time, love, energy, material resources like your home and your stuff, money, relationships, knowledge, experience?

Zoom in further to ask, what about financial resources? **How will you spend, save, give, and invest them?** The culture we live in teaches us to ask that question mainly in terms of our own well-being, and maybe that of our children. But our faith calls us to consider also the well-being of our community and environment in how we steward our financial resources.

So then we zoom in further and ask, **in the money I am called to give and invest, how can I best contribute to the common good?** Or to put it another way, how could our money help us do "God's work with our hands"?

And finally, zooming in to this particular time and place, **how can my financial resources contribute to God's work through *this* congregation?** The stewardship campaign will invite you to consider that and then, by the end of this month, to make a pledge for your giving this year. That's a very specific, zoomed-in question, so it's important to begin today by zooming out and connecting to larger questions about stewardship of our whole lives. And even beyond that, to the God who loves us immensely and has gifted us with "grace upon grace." But in the spirit of the incarnation, we also zoom in and consider the particular, the here and now, because that's where Jesus has come to dwell.

Just as Jesus reveals God's love and light to us, in our time and place, we are called to reveal God's love and light to others in the ways we are church—the ways we worship, serve, teach, forgive, and care for each other. That too is a stewardship question. (Amazing how it always comes back to that! ☺) **As a congregation, what are the particular ways we can contribute what we've been given, to be a light to a world longing for Christ's light and life?** God's love asks nothing of us in order to earn or keep love. But community asks plenty of us in order to share that love with others. So a good question for this year is, **What do those ways of being church invite from each of us, in terms of time and money and relationships and love?**

The stewardship campaign will invite your reflection on that in the coming three weeks, with a letter this week and three handouts on the next three Sundays. (I feel like Marley's ghost in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, telling Scrooge, "You will be visited by three handouts...!") They'll offer reflections on 1) why you might consider regular, proportionate giving; 2) what it is you're actually giving to when you give a regular offering to this congregation; and 3) how you can make your financial contributions, which will be expanding to online options this month.

So, snowstorm or not, that will all be coming this month! As we end, let's zoom out once more to end with Rahner's prayer:

Grant, O Infinite God, that I may ever cling fast to Jesus Christ, my Lord. Let His heart reveal to me how You are disposed toward me. I shall look upon His heart when I desire to know Who You are. The eye of my mind is blinded whenever it looks only at Your Infinity, in which You are totally present in each and every aspect at once. Then I am surrounded by the darkness of Your unboundedness, which is harsher than all my earthly nights. But instead I shall gaze upon His human heart, O God of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and then I shall be sure that You love me.

But I have still one more request. Make my heart like that of Your Son. Make it as great and rich in love as His, so that my brothers and sisters—or at least one of them, sometime in my life—can enter through this door and there learn that You love them.

Hymn of the Day: ELW 715, Christ Be Our Light

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