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“An Image of the Universe and the Voice of a Prophet”

By Edgar F. Solís

Introduction:

This week, you have probably heard of and seen the fantastic image of deep space that the new James Web telescope from NASA has captured.

I did my research and what I have found is amazing. We must be aware that this is not only a high-quality photo of stars and galaxies.

Think about this: Light speed is approximately 300,000 kilometers per second. It can also be expressed as 186,000 miles per second.. A light year is a distance measured, and it is the number of kilometers that a photon – a light particle - travels in a year.

Now, what we see here are galaxies and stars that are at 13.1 billion years old. This means that the photons captured by the James Webb telescope came out of those galaxies and stars 13.1 billion years ago!

This is amazing!

We know that the Milky Way, our galaxy, has approximately the same age. Our sun and earth are less than 4.5 billion years old . Before that, there were stars of previous generations where the atoms of which we are made were formed.

Yes, according to science, the carbon and iron that we have in our bodies right now come from the stars.

If you look at your hand right now, 13.1 billion years ago, the atoms that are currently in your hands were in the heart of supernovas, billions of miles away, and all these atoms were separated.

Yes, what you can see in your hand is the collection of particles that at the moment in which the photons came out of the galaxies and stars were separated by millions of miles.

There was no Sun, no earth, and obviously, we did not exist as humans.

We are now witnesses to what happened in a moment in the universe when our atoms were all spread through the universe.

And the stars and galaxies that we are now admiring in the fantastic images of the James Webb telescope no longer exist!

The universe that God created is vast; we are so small, finite, and limited.

Sometimes it is crucial to look at how small we are so we can find better ways to spend our time and live our existence according to God's will.

In a different style, from the religious and spiritual arena, the prophet Amos spoke to the people of his time, calling for humbleness to live a worthy life of justice and love for everyone.

Contexts matters:

The New Interpreter Study Bible says that in this vision, Amos sees something that suggests disaster through a wordplay in verse 2.

The Hebrew for "Summer fruit" is *qayits*, and the Hebrew for the "End" is *qets*.

He condemns commercial malpractices and people that mistreat and defraud the poor.

So yes, this passage is an oracle of unconditional doom which seems to include natural disasters and military defeat.

Prophecy will cease as God withdraws even from communicating with Israel.

All vestiges of hope are here silenced, and it is hard to believe that the prophet saw anything positive on the far side of this utter desolation.

Carolyn Sharp, in her book *Old Testament Prophets for Today*, states that:

“No prophet has a stronger voice for justice than Amos. Amos is a terrifying prophet of judgment whose uncompromising call to spiritual integrity leaves his audience no place to hide. The people of Israel are brought to their knees by Amos’s use of irony and ambiguity. Amos’s goal is to humble his audience so they can be spiritually ready to encounter God.”

In particular, Dr. Kevin Small from The Discipleship Ministries of the United Methodist Church shares about this passage.

“Looking back over those years, fruit was a special part of summer cuisine. This didn’t last, however. It was frustrating in the fall months, seeing a marvelously round cantaloupe waiting to be picked up only to take it back home and discover it has lost its sweetness. It was no longer enjoyable and usually ended up being discarded.

“God and Amos have a discussion. God uses a visual to help get the message across. Knowing Amos was a bit of a farmer himself, God brings this narrative in a way Amos could thoroughly understand it. “What do you see?” Amos mentioned a fruit basket, and possibly all the enjoyable things related to it came to his mind.

“But God didn’t see just ripe fruit. God saw fruit that was on its way to being rotten. This fruit didn’t have long before it began to be no good.

“God likens this scenario to the people of Israel. God is receiving what the people are giving. God sees the injustice; God sees the oppression; God sees the inequality, and the economic injustice. God unfolds for Amos the plan of judgment.

“God always raises up a prophet to represent God’s refusal to go along with oppressive behavior. In Amos, we are able to refute any arguments that God is not a God of the oppressed.”

Theological reflection:

Both visions call us to be humble and understand that our existence is better living when we lift our eyes to heaven and the sky.

We have a new image of the universe that is intriguing and intimidating; we also have the ancient voice of a prophet that calls us to change our human behavior by treating all people with justice and compassion.

Today we celebrate our tenth-anniversary of becoming a reconciling congregation.

I pray that we can live out more than words or slogans, an actual practice of total inclusion for everyone.

We have people in our community that is still suffering from discrimination. As a church, we must be open to God's presence and a voice for acceptance of all people, but I don't think passive acceptance is enough.

We need to grow in our experience and practice of bringing people from the LGBTQ+ community to our church ministry.

This is a call for all of us to learn.

In My Christian journey, I must learn how to integrate into my life not only the knowledge of inclusion but the Christian practice of acceptance and affirming those who are different from me.

When I read Amos, I fill goosebumps many times because the prophet's words are hard to listen to and even harder to practice, mainly when we have a mindset and a culture of indifference and exclusion – two characteristics that many people have: You either don't care or you reject people.

In Des Moines First United Methodist Church, we want to move in the direction of God, care for people, and intentionally open the doors of our hearts and Church ministry and building for everyone in our community.

Conclusion:

Dear church, I have shared with you the fascinating new images of the deep universe and the challenging words of the Old Testament prophet. In both scenarios, the call for humbleness is the same.

The NASA web page states that the James Webb Space Telescope has delivered the deepest and sharpest infrared image of the distant universe.

Webb's First Deep Field of a galaxy cluster is teeming with thousands of galaxies – including the faintest objects ever observed in the infrared.

Webb's image is approximately the size of a grain of sand held at arm's length, a tiny sliver of the vast universe. We are looking back in time to within a billion years after the Big Bang when viewing the youngest galaxies in this field.

And what is the call?

What are the sensation and the feeling of knowing that we are almost nothing in the vast universe?

What is God's call for us when Amos' words express what God has shown him?

Dear church, today is a golden opportunity to be aware that the God that created the universe is also the God that has paid attention to us, the God that has sent us prophets, and the God that loves us all, but to what end?

We are so limited, tiny, and insignificant in the universe that we need to use our time and energy on this beautiful planet to enjoy our existence with love, compassion, and grace for everyone.

May our Lord Jesus Christ guide us through the power of the Holy Spirit to embrace and affirm all human beings and all creation with dignity and love as we travel in the vast universe that God has created!

Amen!