

+ In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti + Amen.

Text: Romans 10:8

Theme: The Word Is Near You



Dear friends in Christ Jesus,

The universe is expanding...at least according to some of the foremost experts in the field. The heavenly bodies- planets, stars, blackholes, entire galaxies- are said to be moving apart at pace. What exactly the universe is supposedly expanding *in to* is a perplexing question? Telescopic observations suggest the universe is dynamic, but direct verifications are not possible. Sophisticated mathematical equations are employed for these astronomic theories. The distances suggested are so vast they are not calculated with traditional measurements. Light travels a long way in a year, but a year is just a short stroll compared to the size of the universe. None of this mindboggling magnificence should surprise us because our omnipotent God has unlimited capability.

It is widely understood that we are just a miniscule dot on a planet that itself is a mere speck in the universe. Ludicrously small. But, dear friends, the God who created that universe, has drawn near to us, become one of us, taking on flesh and blood. And the immensity of His love, the love of the crucified and risen Jesus, dwarfs the cosmos. Christianity is not a methodology to circumscribe God- to find Him, approach Him, probe Him or access Him. Christianity is a strategy for surviving His presence. *“The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us.”*¹ The God who flung the farthest star out into space is near to you.

Today St. Paul unpacks the significance of that *nearness*. *“The righteousness that is by faith says: ‘Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) ‘or ‘Who will descend into the deep?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? ‘The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,’ that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.”*²

We are justified by faith, through Christ’s sacrificial work, and this results in a coordinated relocation of sin and God’s blessings. Sin severs people from the holiness of God. Now sin’s estranging significance (we’ll call it distancing in the current context, a term we’re becoming too familiar with) can’t be measured with the metric system, kilometers, light years, or other mathematical equations. Sin is transgression of the perfect will of God. It involves missing the

mark and also disobedience resulting from willful rejection or ignorance. Yet, sin does not separate us from God in matters of degree, as if, a little bit of sinning kept God at arm's length, more sinning pushed God to edge of the horizon, and complete ungodliness pressed Him to the far reaches of the galaxy. The distancing consequence of sin is categorical. If we are not in His light, we are in the dark.

God is unmovable. We're the ones always wandering from His presence. And if we're cut off from God, that doesn't mean we have some space to take a breather and do things our own way. It means His judgment is imminent. But God always moves towards us, and He moved to intervene to prevent the condemnation of the human race. The heart of the gospel is this: Jesus sandwiched Himself between sinners and the wrath of God that was pressing upon them. He got so close He was squeezed upon the cross. He got so near He became *THE sinner* on behalf of all sinners. Dear friends, the challenge of Christian living, of living baptismally, is not finding God in the big or small things each day. The challenge is understanding that God was never lost.

In our Scripture St. Paul says that confessing Jesus as Lord is a mark of true faith. Why, because it recognizes that in the incarnation, God is present on earth- not just visiting, He is dwelling. The title "Lord" is the Greek translation of the Hebrew covenantal name of God, Yahweh. To confess Jesus as Lord was to equate Him with God, the Father. This is, of course, exactly Paul's point. The God who had been faithful to the Israelites throughout the centuries has now come in the person of Jesus. Christ was the fulfillment of the promises, only many didn't receive Him. Though Jesus was crucified on the accusation of being a threat to Caesar, the real charge was blasphemy. This Jesus had made himself equal to God. Understandably, then, the early Christians were always running foul of the Jews for their belief in the divinity of Jesus.

First Century believers confessing Jesus as Lord carried the added risk of offending the state officials. The title lord was also reserved for the Roman Emperor. Other use of the term was not looked upon favourably. The Romans generally permitted and even encouraged religious pluralism. They saw it as one of the historical strengths of the empire. They did not, however, tolerate exclusive claims to deity. In summary, significant risk was involved for early Christians to confess Jesus as Lord. It's difficult for us to appreciate the danger. We are still free to gather and confess of Him "God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God."³ But it's a very important lesson in history, and one persecuted believers around the world understand readily.

Whether or not we believe the universe is expanding is not our concern here. Our interest is in the expansive love of Christ. At one point St Paul prays for the believers in Ephesus asking that they might be able "*to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge.*"⁴ Love that surpasses knowledge, love that surpasses measurement, is divine love. It is extravagant.

The story is told that one day a beggar by the roadside asked for charity from Alexander the Great as he passed by with his mighty army. The man was poor and wretched and had no claim upon the ruler, no right to even put out his hand for help. Yet the Emperor threw him several gold coins. A courtier was astonished at his generosity and commented, "Sir, copper coins would adequately meet a beggar's need. Why give him gold?" Alexander responded, "Copper coins would suit the beggar's need, but gold coins suit Alexander's giving." Generosity suits our God.

It's a great way to understand the gift we receive in Holy Communion. Like beggars, crumbs from the Master's table would suit us. We need only our daily bread. But He gives us a heavenly feast. Jesus gives us His life-giving body and precious blood, food for the soul, medicine for healing, strength for the journey. We need only to survive, but He lavishes us. What did the Father say when the prodigal son returned home? "*Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it.*"⁵

So, you see, the love of Christ is categorical too. It cannot be measured, and it is not rationed. God isn't cruel. God doesn't toy with us or play games. He doesn't jest when He offers His word, His Spirit, His grace. He is not frugal with His mercy or thrifty with His love. And He is not distant. "*The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart.*"⁶ This proximate Jesus died for you, rose for you, and lives for you. Amen.

Ninth Sunday After Pentecost
9 August 2020
Reverend Darrin L. Kohrt

¹ John 1:14

³ The Nicene Creed

⁵ Luke 15:22-23

² Romans 10:8-10

⁴ Ephesians 3:18-19

⁶ Romans 10:8

