

The Rev. Catherine Amy Kropp
St Barnabas Episcopal Church
First Sunday in Lent, March 10, 2019
Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16
Romans 10:8b-13
Luke 4:1-13

Journeying into the Cosmic Christ

Gracious God, as we consider where we are and where you are calling us to be, help us to come home to you, in all ways, so that we may enter into the fullness of our being. Amen.

Good Morning. I'd like to thank the Reverend Ted Pardoe for inviting me to St Barnabas. It is a blessing to be with you today and particularly on the first Sunday in Lent.

I have a special fondness for the Lenten season. There is something mysterious about the ways in which we come home to God during Lent

Lent also takes me by surprise. I think I know what it is about: quiet prayer, being still, resting in God, returning to a deeper sense of self, preparing for the power of the resurrected Christ in our world on Easter Sunday

But then I feel myself being led in ways I did not expect. Entering ever more into the mystery of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

And here I am today, already surprised by my Lenten journey, as well blessed, to be where I find myself: here with all of you and considering the beginning of this sacred journey we are on together.

The homeward journey

In the Gospel reading, Jesus tells us to "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God" (Luke 4:8). This is the response he gives when he is tempted by Satan and offered all the kingdoms of the world. What does it mean to worship and serve only God?

Another way of asking this question is, what does it mean for us to be truly at home in God?

In the first reading, we witness the climax of the Exodus story as the Israelites are coming into the Land that the Lord has promised (Deut. 26:3). They are heirs to a great divine promise (Deut. 26:1-11).

This vision of the promised land is also a spiritual one.¹ We are being led on a journey homeward across a spiritual topography; entering into, as we read in the Psalm, “the shelter of the Most High” (Ps 91:1); God as our refuge, our stronghold, our true habitation (Ps 91:2,9).

We are journeying through a landscape that is physical and spiritual, earthly and heavenly, cosmic and intimate.

The cosmic Christ

Ted asked me to preach on the cosmic understanding of Christ, which has become an interest of mine in the mission of the church.

The larger cosmic vision at the beginning of Lent may seem out of place, that is, if you think of Lent as a personal and individual journey involving quiet being and contemplation. Yet, there is a larger understanding of Jesus, as the Christ, that is there all along. It is very much part of the Christian narrative, and I would say, it calling for our attention in ways we might not realize.

I’d like to say that this cosmic part of the Christian narrative, and our journey within it, *matters*. It matters in ways that are significant, not only in our Lenten journey, but in our response to the world around us.

This “cosmic” sense of Christ is what is universal, infinite and immense about Jesus.

This is the human Jesus and, at the same time, the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One.

This is not only a way of describing the mystery of Christ. Rather, the cosmic Christ emerges from the scriptural witness.

All things

There is one phrase in the Scriptures, in particular, that draws me into this universal, cosmic mystery of Christ.

It is just two words: *all things*. In the Letter to the Colossians, Paul describes Christ as the “firstborn of all creation,” how “all things have been created through him and for him,” and that he is the one in whom “all things hold together.” (Col 1:15-20) And in the Gospel of John, we learn that, “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being” (John 1:3).

¹ Nick Carter describes in this passage in Deuteronomy “... the vision of a spiritual promised land that only faith and faithfulness can provide.” in *Feasting on the Word* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), Year C, Lent 1; p. 31.

How is it possible that Jesus is present from the beginning of all things? The Jesus we know, the human being who walked this Earth, 2000 years ago, teaching his disciples, and whose birth, life, death and resurrection became the good news we have been hearing in our journey with God?

How is it possible that through Christ God's love has been present from the beginning, in this world, in all things, and in each one of us?

It doesn't make any sense. 'All things' is a lot of things! I cannot think only about the human story. There are the types of matter, the physical elements, the rocks, the plants and trees, all the creatures and their relationships, and the whole cosmos and everything all together.

It makes me stop and think about what I understand Christ to be.

In our modern way of thinking and understanding of time — which is linear — the cosmic dimension of Christ is hard to take in. We follow the progression of the events in Jesus's life from incarnation to resurrection. Even our church calendar follows the life of Jesus from one event to the next in a divine story.

Maybe this is why Lent comes as a surprise to me: Even though I am entering into a season of time, I am falling away from my linear thinking and into something beyond time and space.

I have discovered that "all things" in Christ shows up in many places in scripture. I am realizing that the cosmic understanding of Christ has been in the biblical witness all along. But in my own spiritual formation and my experience in the church, growing up, I did not hear about Christ as present in and through all things.

Or maybe I just wasn't paying attention! It is there in the Nicene Creed that I know so well: the creed which Christians have recited since the 4th century, confessing their faith in Jesus, the one "Through him all things were made."

The cosmos matters

And so, I wonder, whatever it *means* for Jesus as the Christ to be before and among all things, does it *matter*?

It sounds like beautiful idea, but what does the sense of cosmic beauty and connectedness *mean* in our world and in *our daily lives*?

Why look up? Isn't looking up the same as looking *away* from a world that cries out for our attention? We should focus on issues of human and worldly justice, right? What does the larger cosmos matter amid the real, concrete suffering in this world?

As right now, people are fleeing from violence in Syria and in so many other places, what does the sense of human wonder have to do with affecting change and pursuing God's justice in the world?

As we gaze helplessly at this world around us, and as we glimpse the turmoil in our own selves, what are we supposed to *do* in the smallest of moments?

I would like to suggest something rather bold for our Lenten journey: the whole cosmos through Christ has meaning. It has concrete and *practical* meaning in our daily lives. And it's *urgent*.

If Jesus, the Christ, is the one through whom all things hold together, from the beginning, then *you and I and all things are part of a great interconnectedness*. And if we can see ourselves as part of this vast, integrated web of matter and spirit, then we know what to do. I mean, each of us, in our own little dimension of space and time, can discover what to do in the particularity of one's life.

I believe that the cosmic view is not beyond the realities of our daily lives! I think that the biblical witnesses understood something about Jesus, the anointed One, the Messiah, the Christ, that we in the modern day tend to overlook.

Taking in the whole cosmos through Christ is not about looking up or looking away. Well, it *is* about looking up, but it's also about looking *down, around, beneath, and within*. Into the *smallest* of spaces and the *smallest* of moments.

Our journey through Lent is about the presence of God, calling to us right now, in a way that allows us to see, with our own eyes, that the world is *radiant and connected* through Christ *all the time*.

And this radiant vision matters. If we can *see* ourselves within this beautiful and intricate web of all things, we can see our selves and 'the other' as *precious*. We see that when another is suffering, we are sharing in this suffering. We see the earth as part of ourselves and ourselves as embedded in the earth. We see the *connections within the self and the whole cosmos*.

And then the *smallest* of things matter. They become deeply significant.

- In this cosmic sense of God's love, you might realize that you can open your heart to the person right next to you and be more compassionate.
- You might encounter someone very different from you and realize how deeply connected you are to each other.

- You might realize that it makes a difference if you conserve even a little more energy or reduce even a little more waste.
- And you might realize that *you yourself matter* and that you're *beautiful* and *loved* because you are so deeply *connected*.

Coming home in new ways

Knowing we are connected to all things through Christ means that we are aware of how close we are to God, already.

This is the surprising part about Lent: We discover, not only that we are on a journey home to God, but that we are already there. God is present in the most intimate of ways, and we are part of something that is calling to us. God is journeying to us, leading us to Godself, our true habitation, through all things.

The cosmos itself is moving within us. Richard Rohr describes this universal sense of Christ as an “infinite horizon that pulls us from within and pulls us forward.”²

Becoming at home in God is a cosmic phenomenon that is unfolding around and within us.

We learn, in our reading of the Scriptures, that we cannot find our way on our own; we need an example, the Christ, the way of the cross, showing us the way home, and reconciling us to God.

And so in this Lenten season, may we be born anew, entering into the life of the One in whom all things come into being and in whom all things hold together, bearing witness to the radiance of Christ in the smallest acts of God's love.

Amen.

² Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ* (2019), p. 5.

Scriptural Passages in which Christ is in “all things” from the beginning

John 1:1-8 (NRSV)

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 **All things** came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. 6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

John 3:16

For God so loved **the world** that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

1 Cor 8:6

yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are **all things** and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, **through whom are all things** and through whom we exist.

Col 1:15-20

15 He is the image of the invisible God, **the firstborn of all creation**; 16 for in him **all things** in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—**all things** have been created through him and for him. 17 He himself is before **all things**, and in him **all things** hold together. 18 He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. 19 For in him all **the fullness of God** was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself **all things**, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Eph 1:3-14

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, 4 just as **he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world** to be holy and blameless before him in love. 5 **He destined us for adoption** as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. 7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace 8 that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight 9 he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, 10 as a plan for **the fullness of time**, to gather up **all things** in him, things in heaven and things on earth. 11 In Christ we have also obtained an **inheritance**, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, 12 so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. 13 In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were **marked**

with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; 14 this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

1 John 1:1-3

1 We declare to you **what was from the beginning**, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning **the word of life** — 2 **this life was revealed**, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was **revealed** to us— 3 we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Chris

Heb 1:1-3

1 Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed **heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.** 3 He is the **reflection** of God's glory and the exact **imprint** of God's very being, and he **sustains all things** by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,