Columns
Horizons
Spirituality



NASA's James Webb Space Telescope captured this image July 12, 2022, showing what NASA describes as "the edge of a nearby, young, star-forming region called NGC 3324 in the Carina Nebula." (Flickr/ NASA's James Webb Space Telescope, CC BY 2.0)



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When I was 10 years old, my family embarked on a "pilgrimage" to a space launch. My sister and I piled into the back of the minivan, surrounded by books and cassette tapes to keep us entertained while we were awake. A flask of coffee and my mom as navigator assistant supported my dad on the seven-hour drive from Georgia to Cape Canaveral, Florida. It took us four attempts before we actually saw a rocket send five human beings into space.

Time has a way of reshaping memories. Truthfully, I remember very little of the space shuttle launch itself. Instead, I remember the time spent together with family — thanks in large part to photographs. For me, the trip was a catalyst in my love for outer space. Maybe it was also something we were studying in school. Perhaps it was because I was reading Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*. The seeds were planted. The vast world of the cosmos captured my heart.



Sister Kathryn, age 10, is pictured with her family at a space launch. (Courtesy of Kathryn Press)

Fast-forward 15 years. I'm a novice sister — and a novice teacher — tasked with teaching third grade science. Having studied humanities during college (and

generally avoiding anything beyond the required Biology 101), I surprised myself with how much I enjoyed teaching science, especially our unit on space. A few years later, when I found myself teaching science again, this time to fifth graders, I was elated. For our combined English language arts/science unit we read *George's Secret Key to the Universe* by Lucy and Stephen Hawking. This later turned into a biography unit on Hawking following his death in 2018. We watched YouTube interviews with astronauts on the International Space Station. Pluto as a planet or dwarf planet became a hot topic in our classroom.

On my own time, I listened to the "Naked Astronomy" podcast from The Naked Scientists. This went beyond preparation for my students, even if that had been my initial motivation. There was something simultaneously delightful and pleasantly frustrating when I challenged myself to learn about the Kuiper Belt, Mars rover, and the weather patterns on the surface of our sun. As an added bonus, my podcast listening gave me new topics to discuss and share with my family. Science, and space in particular, became a new, common interest and language for all of us.

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Given my well-established pattern for liking all things galactical, it shouldn't come as a surprise that I immediately began drooling over the James Webb Space Telescope images when they arrived in my inbox earlier this summer as part of a family email chain. I found them so striking that they became a primary focus for me during my annual retreat. Echoes of the Psalms came to mind when zooming in on the details of the images of cosmic cliffs.

"*By the LORD's word the heavens were made;*

by the breath of his mouth all their host."

—Psalm 33:6, New American Bible

"*When I see your heavens, the work of your fingers,*
the moon and stars that you set in place. ..."

—Psalm 8:4, New American Bible

"*I look up at your macro-skies, dark and enormous,*
your handmade sky-jewelry,

Moon and stars mounted in their settings.
Then I look at my micro-self and wonder,

Why do you bother with us?

Why take a second look our way?"
—Psalm 8:3-4, The Message

"*He numbers the stars, and gives to all of them their names.*"

—Psalm 147:4, New American Bible

"*Where can I go from your spirit?*
From your presence, where can I flee?

If I ascend to the heavens, you are there. ...

If I say, 'Surely darkness shall hide me, and night shall be my light' —

Darkness is not dark for you,

and night shines as the day.

Darkness and light are but one."
—Psalm 139:7-12, New American Bible

Even our Christmas songs draw our focus to the heavens. We've only just now finished singing our secular "psalms" like: *A star, a star, dancing in the night/ With a tail as big as a kite/ With a tail as big as a kite.*

Perhaps it's the darkness of life in the Northern Hemisphere. Maybe it's my recent discovery of Dark Sky Parks (and that there are two near me!), but I've been turning my attention back to the night sky once again. For me, it's not about either science or faith. It's always been both. Science is a vehicle leading me to study and contemplation. Sometimes faith gives me the language to describe this experience. But more than that, my faith, especially the practice of *lectio divina*, provides a way for me to sit before an image of a deep field and pray.

The best word to describe this both/and practice is *wonder*. As Sofia Cavalletti described it:

> The particularity of wonder is that we find activity and contemplation inseparably blended within it. … Wonder is a very serious thing that, rather

> than leading us away from reality, can arise only from an attentive observation of reality. An education to wonder is one that helps us go always deeper into reality.

Science and faith always have something new to teach us. God delights in us as we make such discoveries. Wonder waits around every corner. So, having arrived at the start of a new year, I ask: What are you wondering about? What new area of study can you dive deeper into? How will you dance with action and contemplation given the reality before you?