

It's time to rewrite the textbooks. At least, that's one possibility if some astronomers are correct. Because last week a couple of astronomers in California published a paper claiming "they have found new evidence of a giant icy planet lurking in the darkness of our solar system."<sup>1</sup> They haven't actually seen it. No one has. "Instead, they have inferred [or deduced] its existence" from the movement of other objects nearby. It's an educated guess. Because they can see those other objects. And those other objects are clearly, "influenced by the gravity" of something else. There must be an explanation for what they see, and a big unseen planet fits the bill.

But here's the catch. Even if a big unseen planet is *one* of the explanations for what they see, it's not the only explanation. Far from it. In fact, one of NASA's directors advised real caution when the news was released. He quoted a "famous dictum from [the late astronomer] Carl Sagan [who said] that 'extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence' ... If it's there, find it." And in this situation that's no easy trick. Because even if the astronomers are correct, even if a big unseen planet is out there, even if our best telescopes are pointed in the right direction, we may not even be able to see it more than once every 10,000 years.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/speaking-of-science/wp/2016/01/20/new-evidence-suggests-a-ninth-planet-lurking-at-the-edge-of-the-solar-system/>

When you get right down to it, no one has really discovered a new planet, at least not yet. Because for these scientists “In the end, discovery means it’s been seen. Someone has seen it... [The astronomers said] We think we know the orbit, but we don't know where ... the planet is, and we haven't seen it.” They said, right now their discovery is more like “a treasure map”<sup>2</sup> to go find it.

*Jesus, unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” ... Then he began to say, “Today this scripture is fulfilled,” (Lk. 4.17–21).*

Today, we continue our journey through the season of Epiphany; this brief time period between Christmas and Lent when Jesus has fully & finally appeared. Now that Epiphany is here, Jesus is what we see. Jesus, Jesus, and more Jesus. Jesus is the focus of Epiphany. And for 2,000 years some people have wondered why we Christians are so fixed on Jesus. I mean, he’s a nice guy, but plenty of others were prophetic & loving, plenty of others were healers or magicians in the ancient world. He can appear like a small, irrelevant object on the dark edges of

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/speaking-of-science/wp/2016/01/20/qa-the-pluto-killer-who-thinks-hes-found-the-true-ninth-planet/>

of human history. Why are we so fixed on Jesus?

Because for 2,000 years, Christians have believed that Jesus is the visible evidence for the world's invisible God. Not so different from a couple of astronomers who discover the evidence for a hidden planet when they watch a few small irrelevant objects in space. When Christians see Jesus we discover not just the evidence but the image of the invisible God who stands above, beyond, and within all creation. No one has ever seen that God (Jn. 1.18). But with Jesus we witness God's presence, God's character & God's love. There has to be some explanation for the phenomenon we find in the life, death, and the resurrection of Jesus. There must be some explanation for what we see. And a big unseen invisible God certainly fits the bill.

But here's the catch. Even if a big unseen invisible God is *one* of the explanations for what we find in Jesus, it's not the only explanation. In fact, plenty of people advise caution about what we really find in Jesus. People like Carl Sagan who died agnostic, because, like he said, "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence." If Jesus is God, then go find the evidence.

And in this situation, that's no easy trick. It's really hard to see the evidence of Jesus as God from a distance. And that's okay. Because in end, spiritual

discoveries aren't something we observe from a distance. That's not how we prove anything in the spiritual life. In the spiritual life true discoveries are always something we inhabit from within. True discoveries are always something that shape us and change us. In the end, a true spiritual discovery means that we've been changed, or the world we inhabit has been changed, from within.

Spiritual discoveries look and sound a lot like this morning's Psalm. This morning the psalmist declares that "the heaven's are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork," (Psa. 19.1). That's not the kind of discovery you make with a really big telescope or a really good microphone. Because the rocks & the trees really aren't singing. And the psalmist knows that. He says, "their voice is not heard; yet [still] their voice goes out through all the earth" (Psa. 19.3-4). It's the kind of discovery you only make if you've been changed from within to see creation as the visible evidence of God's wisdom and splendor. No one can prove it like the existence of a planet. It only happens when we're changed from within to see the world anew.

Our invitation during Epiphany is to explore the evidence for God by inhabiting the life, you might even say the orbit, of Jesus from within. We're invited to let the movements of Jesus become our movements. To let the words of

Jesus become our words. We're invited to allow the Spirit of Jesus to inhabit our lives. That's how we find the evidence for God. It's not the kind of thing you can put in a bottle or set on your shelf. It's not simply an educated guess. It's the evidence we discover by allowing the character & love of God to inhabit us.

Our Scripture readings offer a map for the evidence we need. Our Reading from Nehemiah is an invitation to be inhabited by God's renewing love. Because the community we find in Nehemiah is a battered people. They're less than a generation removed from exile & slavery in Babylon. They've returned to their own land but they're starting completely from scratch. Thanks to the grit, determination and creativity of Nehemiah, their governor, and Ezra, their priest, they've somehow managed to build a city wall (for protection) and a temple (for worship).

But the temple & the wall are both like DIY projects gone wrong. The wall isn't very impressive, and the temple is a bit ramshackle compared to the one their ancestors enjoyed just a few generations before. A few verses before today's reading we hear, "The city was wide and large, but the people within it were few, and no houses had [even] been rebuilt," (Neh. 7.4). It's depressing and more than a little hopeless. This is the best they've got.

So what do they do? They gather together “as one person” in the city square and they ask their priest for a Bible Study. They ask Ezra to read the Book of Moses to everyone who could understand. And we know they weren't Episcopalian because they stood listening “from early morning until midday... and the ears of all the people were attentive,” (Neh. 8.3). The question is why? Why get together for an all-day Bible Study when what they really need is a new wall, a better temple and oh, by the way, they need their own homes!

But they choose to listen to God's Word. Why? Not to disprove it. Not to debate it. Not to observe it from afar. They listen for renewal. They listen to be inhabited by the words of Scripture that give shape & meaning to the movement of their lives; especially in seasons of transition, uncertainty, disappointment or despair. “These are average people struggling to stay alive in a hostile environment. They certainly could have used the visible presence of God,” like the signs & wonders described in the days of Moses. But instead, they get a priest reading a book so they can find themselves inhabited by God's renewing love - whatever they face. Because whatever they face, they discover that “God has not abandoned them.” They discover that God is not finished with them yet.<sup>3</sup> It's the

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<sup>3</sup> *The Lectionary Commentary*. Vol. 1. Eerdmans, 2001. pp. 254–255.

kind of discovery you only make if you've been changed from within to see the visible evidence of God's wisdom and splendor whatever you face. No one can prove it like the existence of a planet. It only happens when we're inhabited by God and changed to see the world anew from within.

Our Second Reading from Paul's Letter to the Corinthians is another map; this time a map to be inhabited by God's transformative grace. And Paul describes the world of transformative grace in the place you might least expect to find it: a church. Don't get me wrong. We're all good people. But we know as well as Paul that church is a tricky place. Because we're all looking for something different. We all have different hopes and needs, different faith and trust, different wounds and pains. In some ways the church is the last place you'd ever expect to find graceful people and graceful lives. From our earliest days we've always been known more as a hospital for sinners than a cruise ship for saints. And we'll always have reason to look at each other and to see flaws, opportunities, or mistakes.

The church in Corinth was exactly the same. Corinth was a cosmopolitan port city, with a particular reputation for competition, opportunism, and sensuality. They were constantly a thorn in Paul's side, and I have to imagine at least once or twice that Paul wished he'd never started that church. They were divisive,

competitive & proud. They disparaged Paul's character when he didn't visit as much as they deserved. And, oh, some of them really liked sleeping around.

The church in Corinth was either going to be a train wreck, or, it was going to be a powerful venue for God's transformative grace. In today's Reading Paul offers a map that points the way. He offers a map to inhabit a world where all of those differences, obstacles, annoyances, or opportunities for competition; a world where all of those differences become the visible evidence of God's wisdom and splendor. A world, where they discover that "God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose." So that "there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another" - especially for the weaker, the dishonorable, and the dispensable (1Cor. 12:12-31a).

Our invitation this Epiphany is to explore the evidence for God by allowing ourselves - individually and together - to be inhabited by the character & love of God himself. We're invited to let the movements of Jesus become our movements. To let the words of Jesus become our words. We're invited to allow the Spirit of Jesus to inhabit our lives. That's how we find the evidence for God. It's never going to be the kind of thing we can put in a bottle or place on a shelf. We do it by inhabiting the words of Scripture and allowing God's love to renew us. We do it by

inhabiting the community of the church and allowing God's grace to transform us.

And if we can make even a little progress on those two things, well then maybe

when people look at us; when they see the love and the grace that we find here,

they might even describe us - our little community - as a surprising piece of

evidence for the loving, renewing, and transforming God of Christian faith. *Amen.*