

Christmas Eve & Day 2023
"Awe-some God-With-Us!"
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

The Magi who followed a star to find the newborn King weren't the first or the last to scan and study the heavens. Some of today's astronomers have the fancy name of astrophysicists. They have wonderful tools with which to work, including the James Webb Space Telescope, launched on Christmas morning in 2021. Showing that scientists are not immune to the spirit of the season, a month ago NASA shared a photo of what it has dubbed the Christmas Tree Galaxy Cluster, described as "a winking collection of galaxies 4.3 billion light years from earth."¹ The photo in the paper looks like someone used a wooden pen to make rainbow dots and a couple big splashes on the black canvas of a magic drawing board/scratch and sketch pad. The telescope allows astronomers to see 14 distinct twinkling stars in this holiday cluster. So we don't take any of this for granted, the scientist who led the team that made the discovery explains, "Seeing an individual star in a faraway galaxy is a big deal... Almost a miracle."²

Why "almost"?? Isn't **any** star-studded sky a miracle? Even when seen with the naked eye and not through a billion-dollar telescope? The light that reaches Earth today was emitted from that Christmas Tree Galaxy Cluster about the same time that our Earth and Sun were being born. Amazing.... **Awesome!**

Just last week Mother Nature provided another astonishing spectacle when the volcano on Iceland's Reykjanes [REK-e-ness] Peninsula began to erupt, spewing columns of burning gas and fiery, glowing lava into the air. Two years ago it awakened from an 800 year hibernation³, but this past week's activity makes any earlier displays pale in

comparison, including the more than 1,400 earthquakes it spawned in just 24 hours back in November.⁴ A government spokesperson noted the inherent danger of the eruption, “emphasizing that this was ‘no tourist volcano.’”⁵ But folks who have traveled to Iceland to catch the Northern Lights (as some of you have) will see much more than that in the skies this holiday. Amazing.... **Awesome!**

Take a moment to think about it. When’s the last time **you** felt **awe**?

The last time I **saw** awe on someone else’s face was a week ago at the Sunday School Advent Pageant. Pint-sized Mary & Joseph came down the aisle, pushing 7-month-old “Baby Jesus” in his carriage, completely obscured by the voluminous cloud of gold and white gauze surrounding him. They were going at mach speed over the little bump at the bottom of the ramp. The carriage wasn’t quite airborne, but all the adults in the room let out a little gasp and were waiting to hear a wail from the tiny passenger. But despite the jostling there wasn’t even a **peep**, so surprising that I whispered to the church friend next to me in the pew, “Is there even a baby **in** that carriage?” You may not believe this, but the first baby sound came as the congregation sang these words from “Away in a Manger”: “The little Lord Jesus, no crying He makes”! That little cry of unhappiness coming from beneath the voluminous veil of fabric alerted the child standing next to Mary that there was in fact a **live** baby in the carriage! If for any reason you’re a little blue this Christmastime, promise yourself to watch the pageant in the Facebook or YouTube recording of 10:30 worship on December 17. The look of awe on the face of that startled, delighted child, and also on the faces of Mary & Joseph as they beam down on their little ward, is priceless. I feel happy just thinking about it! Baby Jack Edwin, AKA Baby Jesus, stole the show without ever showing his face to the rest of us!

I asked you before about the last time **you** felt **awe**. I'll answer that for myself. I was caught unawares (and that's usually how awe happens) when friends and I were visiting the newly dedicated Hindu temple (called a mandir) in Robbinsville⁶. We entered on the ground floor of the immense structure, an imposing granite mountain of lacy carved stonework. Our group was directed to remove our shoes, which for us certainly brought to mind God's command as Moses gaped at the burning bush that wasn't being consumed: "Take off your shoes; you're standing on holy ground." (Exodus 3:5) We were given the option of taking the elevator or walking up 30+ stairs to the sanctuary itself. We climbed the stairs in our stocking feet, and as we rounded the final corner and got our first glimpse of the domed sanctuary, the dazzling white beauty of that soaring space took my breath away. I think my mouth dropped open. I was awestruck. I felt awe, as much as I felt the first time I entered Notre Dame Cathedral as a high schooler, and saw shards of light from the stained glass falling through the dimly lit sanctuary and shattering, scattering on the stone floor like gems cast about.... Amazing. Awesome.

Our Hindu tour guide had polled us earlier in the tour about our faith background and knew that some of us were Christians. He asked us, "So who is Jesus Christ?" While we debated within ourselves what kind of response he was looking for, he answered his own question: "The Son of God, right?" We nodded, "Yes!" (And we thought, "But we didn't think you believed that, too.") Then he gave a mini-Christmas homily right there when he added, "God became man, right?" We heartily agreed! He proceeded to explain Hindu belief that God (the supreme being, Brahman) takes on human form in more than one person. And since you can never be sure what God is up to, in whom God may pop up, all people should be treated as if they are divine. That doesn't seem so very different from our

Christian teaching about Emmanuel, God-with-us, who taught us that in loving and serving our brothers and sisters, we are loving and serving Emmanuel, Jesus, himself.... Amazing. Awesome!

In his book *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life*, Dacher (DAK-er) Keltner writes, “Awe is the emotion we experience when we encounter vast mysteries that we don’t understand.”⁷ “Awe occurs in... a realm beyond the profane that many call sacred.”⁸ The awe engendered by spying on the Christmas Tree Galaxy Cluster, witnessing the volcanic eruption on Iceland’s Reykjanes [REK-e-ness] Peninsula, being surprised by the presence of a **real** baby when we expected a baby **doll**, finding ourselves in medieval or modern, Christian or Hindu sacred space that takes our breath away – wonderful, but dwarfed by the awe of God becoming human in Jesus Christ. **Other** aspects of Christmas may seem less magical to us as we grow older; but the **heart** of Christmas, the most precious gift, the birth of Emmanuel, God-with-us, should become ever more mystical. May the Holy Spirit open our hearts to awe, more and more. May we embrace the vast mysteries that we don’t understand, and live more and more in a realm that is sacred, honoring the God who became flesh in every soul we meet. Amen

¹Katrina Miller, “A Holiday Light Show in Outer Space,” *New York Times*, December 19, 2023, D8.

²Ibid.

³Egill Bjarnason and Jenny Gross, “After Weeks of Buildup, a Must-See Nature Show,” *New York Times*, December 20, 2023 (A1, A6), A6.

⁴Egill Bjarnason and Cassandra Vinograd, “Miles of Shooting Lava: Eruption Lights Up Iceland’s Skies,” *New York Times*, December 20, 2023, A6.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Formal name: BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir

⁷Dacher Keltner, *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life* (NY: Penguin Press, 2023), p. xvi.

⁸Ibid, p. 19.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

