



Advent
in the New Universe Story
2014

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Overview

This Advent program provides an opportunity for Christians to deepen their understanding of the Christmas/ Incarnation reality in the context of the New Universe Story. We now know that creation began 13.8 billion years ago, that the expanding universe contains billions of galaxies, that we and all creation are new each moment and intrinsically interconnected. We no longer live in a world with God "above." This requires some basic re-thinking of the Christmas story! The Incarnation is a Mystery that a lifetime of contemplation would not exhaust. More and more theologians and others are writing about the transitions needed for its mutual integration with cosmic history. These pages contain just a few of their insights.

The four weeks include

New Consciousness, New Christian Understanding

The Cosmos Prepares for New Life

Evolving Understanding of Humanity's Place in Creation

Incarnation Revisited

Suggestions for Convener

Be sure all participants know when and where to meet, and that each has made a four-week commitment to participate. Make copies on sustainable paper using both sides; distribute at first meeting. Have name cards for each participant to facilitate remembering names. If a participant cannot come to a session, you might want to put the name in the center as a reminder to include the person in the group's prayerful energy. Find out if the group wants refreshments and, if so, how they will be provided.

Be creative with this material. Adapt it in any way that facilitates your group's prayerful reflection, faith sharing, community building, and deepened appreciation of the Incarnation. Stop in time to complete the closing and to socialize.

Begin with introductions, share why individuals chose to participate, and skim the pages. Begin each week with silent reflection time. Include music as desired.

Suggested Centerpiece

Place an Advent Wreath or other traditional symbol(s) of Advent in the center.

Scripture quotations are from Eugene H. Peterson's *The Message: the Bible in Contemporary Language*.

Week One: *New Consciousness, New Christian Understanding*

Ps. 80: 18: Breathe life into our lungs so we can shout out your name

1 Cor. 1: 7: Just think — you don't need a thing, you've got it all! All God's gifts are right in front of you as you wait expectantly for the revelation of Christ.

Mark 13: 35, 37: Keep awake . . . Stay at your post. Keep watch.

1 Corinthians calls us to wait expectantly for the revelation of the Christ. The revelation of the Christ comes in time, through evolution, but it's not automatic. We're also called to think. Advent calls us to *re-pent*; the actual meaning of which, in Greek, is re-think. Our conscious expansion of awareness of the divine presence — how God lives and acts among us in our time — helps to incarnate the Mystery we call Christ. We think with our amazing gifts of mind and spirit, so we "don't need a thing" but openness and desire to expand our consciousness, to ponder the new creation story and let it evoke our awe and "radical amazement." (Judy Cannato)

Try to enter into the "re-thinking" required of Mary as she pondered the ramifications of her "Yes." Suddenly she was breathing for two! Perhaps this expanded the way she prayed Psalm 80 as she awaited her child's birth: "Breathe life into our lungs so we can shout your name!" We now know we share the air we breathe with all creation on Earth — we breathe not just for two, but for, and with, all creation! How might our awareness of sharing breath with all creation this week expand our consciousness?

"A mistake in one's understanding of Creation will necessarily cause a mistake in one's understanding of God." (Thomas Aquinas) Modern science provides new understandings of creation, so thoughtful believers need to expand their images of God to match today's worldview. We are transitioning from thinking that God is above, to realizing that our expanding cosmos is infused and alive with divinity. "If we are to remain faithful to the gospel," Teilhard de Chardin wrote, "we have to adjust its spiritual code to the new shape of the universe."



Pause for silent prayer or sharing.

In 1948 Sir Fred Hoyle predicted: "Once a photograph of Earth, taken from the outside, is available, a new idea as powerful as any in history will be let loose." We have experienced that moment, that idea. Other scientific discoveries expand our concepts of spacetime, interdependence, the place of human beings within creation, kinship. Cosmologists give us a

creation story that serves every religion, but requires "re-penting"/rethinking what many once believed was historical truth.

The forward to the proceedings of Yale's meeting, Toward a New Consciousness, states: "The changes needed to sustain human and natural communities can only be achieved in the context of the rise of a new consciousness." If this were easy, it would have happened by now! "The difficulty lies not in the new ideas, but in escaping from the old ones. . . ." (J.M. Keynes) "New seeing means letting go of old seeing." (Evelyn Woodward)

"We humans are in the process of shifting our perception from a worldview in which everything is solid, fixed and permanent . . . to a universe in constant change . . . expanding, and . . . in the process of evolving . . . We are no longer the separate, autonomous beings we once thought we were." (Elaine Prevallet, S.L.)

Science calls us to a new awareness of how all life is interconnected and evolving. Increasing numbers of believers feel "called" with a passion for the world because no one exists apart from everything else. That's new! Unlike earlier stages of evolution, this evolution of consciousness requires cooperation with the creation process through free choice: learning, sharing, grappling, trusting in God's help to move with evolution into a new understanding of Holy Mystery and of ourselves in creation. It highlights the wonder that everything we need is within; we need to bring it to full birth. What better time than in Advent?

Sharing: What sentence above calls you to prayerful pondering? How has your understanding of creation changed since your childhood? What is your "growing-to-awareness" story?

Suggested quote to ponder this week: *"Dwelling in the presence of God, we begin to experience ourselves as part of creation, not separate from it."* (Renewing the Earth, USCCB, 1991)

Suggestions for reading:

- Judy Cannato, Radical Amazement, Sorin Books, 2006 (esp. pp. 7 - 38)
- Barbara Fiand, Awe-Filled Wonder, Paulist Press, 2008
- Elizabeth A. Johnson, Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit, Paulist Press, 1993

Week Two: The Cosmos Prepares for New Life

Share any relevant insights from Week One.

Is. 40: 1-5, 9-11: . . . thunder . . . wilderness . . . desert . . . valleys . . . mountains . . . rocks . . . ground . . . mother sheep . . . nursing ewes

Ps. 85: 11: . . . sprouts green from the ground, . . . pours down from the skies.

2 Peter 3: 8, 13: With God one day is like a thousand years

Mark 1: 8: His baptism by the Holy Spirit will change you from the inside out.



In today's readings Peter calls our attention to time: one day, a thousand years. No one in Sacred Scripture could have imagined billions of years — nor could they have guessed that our universe began some mind-boggling 13.8 billion years ago with the Flaring Forth of energy that evolved into everything we know. They could not have guessed that our own planet's cosmic story began then, continued through generations of stars, and, some 4.5 billion years ago, one star's death resulted in our Solar System including our planet, rotating around a star in a galaxy in one of billions of galaxies.

All creation, including human beings, continually evolve. The static universe most of us imagined in our youth was a misconception due to our lack of knowledge. Even in our bodies, "nothing in our genes was present a year ago . . . Every moment, a portion of the body's 10^{28} atoms is returning to the world outside, and ninety-eight percent of them are replaced annually." (David S. Toolan) These facts call us to "re-pent" (cf. p. 3) our understanding of who we are, who God is, who Jesus is, and how we relate, one to each and all.

The Spirit that came to Jesus at his baptism "has been 'the Lord and giver of life' all along. Yes, the personal characteristics of the Spirit were named for the first time by Jesus and most clearly manifest in the person of Jesus, but the Spirit was present in the universe from time immemorial." (John C. Haughey) At each moment, the Spirit of God anoints us and all creation on Earth and in the cosmos.



Pause for silent prayer or sharing.

Although current scientific facts would have been incomprehensible to Mary, nevertheless she carried within her the same energy that flared forth to produce stars, our planet, and everything that exists. She, too, was born of stardust. She, too, had the Spirit from the beginning. As a result, Mary and her Child — like us — shared kinship with every item in creation mentioned by Isaiah

above. The Divine Child was "enclosed for billions of years in the womb of the cosmos" before living in Mary's womb, and he is truly "Child of Earth and Child of the stars." (Terry Moran)

This week we reflect on the cosmos' preparation for Jesus of Nazareth and give thanks for him, "who so allowed the Spirit of extravagant generosity to move in his life that we recognize in him the wonder of the Spirit in human form." (Michael Morwood) We are invited to deepen our acceptance "from the inside out" that "we belong to a reality greater than ourselves . . . All our thoughts, dreams and aspirations arise from this cosmic wellspring within which we live and grow, and we are empowered to realize our full potential as planetary, cosmic creatures." (Diarmuid O'Murchu)

Pause to ponder.

Seen with the eyes of faith, "the story of our universe and of life on our Earth, and everything that science can tell us about its evolutionary history, is part of a larger story, the story of divine self-bestowal." (Denis Edwards) Within that story, Mary birthed Jesus of Nazareth. His last name was not "Christ"! "The Christ," is a title we use for the cosmic, eternal Being who has bestowed life within creation from its beginning: "in whom all things hold together." (Colossians 1: 17) We are constantly called to be "changed from the inside out" by renewing our understandings both of the human Jesus and of the Eternal Christ.

With Mary and all women who have experienced birth-giving, "may we too labor with creation to give birth to a new heaven and a new earth." May we "find the Holy Child with Mary his Mother, and with his mother Earth." (Terry Moran)

Sharing: What sentence above calls you to prayerful pondering? How has our understanding of God's living and acting in creation been enriched by new scientific discoveries?

Suggestions for reading:

- Diarmuid O'Murchu, Quantum Theology: Spiritual Implications of the New Physics, Crossroad Publishing, 1997 (esp. pp. 106- 109 and 197 - 203)
- Margaret Silf, Roots and Wings: the Human Journey from a Speck of Stardust to a Speck of God, Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006 (esp. Prologue and pp. 59 - 86)
- Neil Vaney, S.M., Christ in a Grain of Sand: An Ecological Journey with the Spiritual Exercises, Ave Maria Press, 2004 (esp. pp. 9 - 73)

Week Three: Evolving Understanding of Human's Place in Creation

Share any relevant insights from Week Two.

Is. 61: 1, 10: The Spirit of God is on me because God anointed me . . . God has covered me with the robe of righteousness.

1 Thess. 5: 23: May the God who makes everything holy and whole make you holy and whole, put you together — spirit, soul, and body — and keep you sound and blameless for the coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

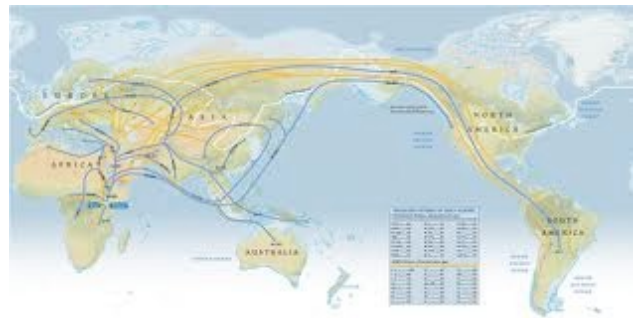
John 1: 19, 22: "Who are you?"

This week we ponder the dignity, call, and righteousness of every human being: Who are we humans? Science now tells us that matter is made of waves and coalescences of stardust and light reconfiguring into cars and trees, oceans and civilizations! We are cosmic evolution, happening right here and now. We are the living face of evolution, the eyes and hands and minds of the universe weaving itself into its next manifestations, day after day after day. We are the universe becoming conscious, watching itself through microscopes and telescopes, on mountaintops and through meditations, awed, nudging its pieces into greater awareness and love.

"This shift from seeing ourselves as separate beings placed on earth to seeing ourselves as an expression of Earth is a major shift in our understanding of who we are. It's a shift at the deepest level." (Michael Dowd, Connie Barlow)

Pause for silent prayer or sharing.

Like all life, humans began with what is believed to be the Flaming FORTH. With creation we developed through eons of slow change. For the first three billion years of Earth, our ancestors were single-cell organisms. *Homo erectus* dates back about 1,500,000 years.



"Modern" humans reached Europe about 40,000 years ago. For about the past 2,500 years Western civilization has identified humans as did the Greeks: as different from, and superior to, everything else. In this model of creation, independence and survival of the fittest governed individual and group actions and seemed to be inherent. The first Garden account of creation fits this mindset: humans are superior to the rest of creation and charged with dominion over them.

Within the past century, scholars of many disciplines — including theology — have discovered that creation is relational, interdependent, holistic. The widely-held and assumed-to-be-divinely-sanctioned hierarchical model of creation is now seen as inadequate. Genesis 2: 5-25 has a frequently-forgotten creation account that supports another view: God takes earth, *adamah*, and forms humans from it. God's breath/ Spirit animates *adam*. We care for Earth because we are part of it and because God's presence makes it sacred.

Humans are not *on* Earth, but are *of* Earth, inseparably part of it. Further, in Genesis 2 God charges humans to till and care for it. The Hebrew word can translate as "to serve." We are here, in this account, not to dominate, but to serve the totality of creation. We can consciously celebrate creation and praise its Creator.

Pause to ponder.

Because we are used to the former story, it's possible to feel this new story of our identity negates the marvel of each human's dignity and worth. Far from it! God's breath, active in the old story, is just as active in the new. The place of humans, once thought to be at the top of a pyramid, is now understood to be in a relational whole, but our distinct gifts and responsibilities remain with us. We are enhanced, rather than nullified, by the company we keep: all creation.

So, who are we? We are unique dimensions of the Universe, each of whom reveals an aspect of God's Spirit at our time/place in the cosmic story. We reveal and enjoy God's presence and love; we bring the Christ to reality in our time. With everyone in the Advent/Christmas drama and everyone who has ever lived, we share — and shape — the evolving and distinctive gifts that distinguish us from non-human life. Not only are we intelligent beings, we are the Universe's means finally to become aware of itself and of Jesus' place in the story.

Like all creation, we are participating in constructing the future, but we humans have the awareness that we are doing it. That's one essential difference of being human. We recognize that we are part of the Great Work Thomas Berry talked about, and we can awaken ever more to the fact that we are called to participate in it with deeper love.

Sharing: What sentence above calls you to prayerful pondering? Each member share.

Suggestions for reading:

- Beatrice Bruteau, [The Holy Thursday Revolution](#), Orbis, 2005 (esp. pp. 85 - 160; challenging but worth the effort)
- Ilija Delio, editor, [From Teilhard to Omega: Co-creating an Unfinished Universe](#), Orbis, 2014
- Margaret Galiardi, [Where the Pure Water Flows: The New Story of the Universe and Christian Faith](#), Sor Juana Press, 2008

Week Four: Incarnation Revisited

Share any relevant insights from Week Three.

Ps. 89: 2: I'll never quit telling the story of your love — how you built the cosmos and guaranteed everything in it. . . .

Rom. 16: 26: . . . the truth is, God . . . got all this started.

Lk. 1: 35: The child you bring to birth will be called Holy.

Christians have long believed that in Christ we unite ourselves to the whole of humanity. New understandings of our unity with all creation clarify how, in the unique incarnation we celebrate at Christmas, we unite with all of creation.



"In our own time the vitally important question has become for us to define the links between Christ and the universe: how they stand in relation to one another and how they influence one another. . . . By his incarnation [the Christ] inserted himself not just into our humanity, but into the universe which supports humanity. The presence of the incarnate word . . . shines at the heart of all things." (Teilhard de Chardin)

Science enriches our understanding of the child born of Mary. "Through his DNA, Jesus took on not just Mary's biological past, but the genetic inheritance of the Semitic peoples. . . . He inherited chemical bonds laid down in the cooling of supernovae, structures that developed in plants, muscle and tissue structure found in animals, and finally the embodied spirit unique to human creatures. In taking on this inheritance, he became connected to every being at every level of this entire cosmos." (Neil Vaney) Elizabeth Johnson agrees: "The Word of God's embodied self became a creature of Earth, a complex unit of minerals and fluids, an item in the carbon, oxygen, and nitrogen cycles, a moment in the biological evolution of this planet."

Saint John Paul II believed that the judges who condemned Galileo's science were "incapable of dissociating faith from age-old cosmology," (of letting go of old seeing) which might also influence hesitations today to see all creation as sacramental.

Pause to ponder.

Of course, creation is not synonymous with God, a pantheistic belief that is not part of the new cosmology. The new understanding is termed panentheism: "all-in-God." (A panentheistic belief system is one that believes God interpenetrates and empowers every part of nature, but is nevertheless fully distinct from nature.)

The child Mary brings to birth remains God's unique and beloved Word from the womb to the cross and to Easter. God also lives and acts in us and in our world each moment, as we continually come to birth. "In contemplation the human spirit learns to see the presence of the divine in nature, and so recognizes that the earth is a sacred place. For such a spirit the biblical bush still burns, and we take off our shoes." (Elizabeth A. Johnson) Saint John Paul said: "Respect for life and the dignity of the human person extends also to the rest of creation." Thus we have a responsibility to protect our interconnected ecosystems, climate, and species, including the most vulnerable.

Sharing: How might these Advent reflections influence your Advent and Christmas prayer? Share one word that sums up for you these Advent meetings. Exchange Christmas wishes.

Suggestions for reading:

- Luke Timothy Johnson, "Caring for the Earth: Why Environmentalism Needs Theology," Commonweal, July 15, 2005
- Denis Edwards, Jesus the Wisdom of God: An Ecological Theology, Orbis, 1995 (esp. pp. 69 - 87 and 133 - 171)
- Cletus Wessels, Jesus in the New Universe Story, Orbis Books, 2003 (esp. pp. 170 - 225)



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with thanks to past participants, Nancy Frommelt, O.S.F.,
T.J. Murphy, Ph.D., John Surette, S.J., and
the Society of the Holy Child Jesus