



The Helix Nebula

John 1:1-18

In the beginning, the universe was very hot and compact and dense. Suddenly, or at least we think it was sudden, forces began rapidly expanding and cooling, forming subatomic particles that later coalesced into atoms and formed primordial elements such as hydrogen. Shaped by gravity and conditioned by dark matter, these elements became early stars and galaxies. If you came in through the Fellowship Hall this morning to drop off your potluck goodies, you probably saw a picture of the Helix Nebula, reminding us of the almost unfathomable wonders of the universe.

We have been focused on the Christmas story as something close-up and personal: the expectant parents, the baby's arrival, the sweet-smelling hay. And all that is just as it should be, miracle enough. God among us in human form. But now with John's gospel we also take in the sweep of time and cosmology. Jesus Christ is not only God from the time of his birth but is the very Word of God, present since before the beginning of the world. This is the genesis of the Good News, before time even began.

Just like Mary, the mother of God, we might exclaim, “But how can this be?” John chooses to answer this question with a poem or a hymn, as the introduction calls it. I love the language of science, and science continues to amass knowledge about the workings of the cosmos. But there is a past horizon beyond which we cannot see. Existing theories about physics cannot explain conditions before the Big Bang or what happened at its moment. While we will continue to learn more, pieces of information in the form of light are moving away from us and may *never* reach earth or its instruments. Instead we lean into the mystery, believing in a power greater than ourselves *or* our ability to understand that power.

Genesis tells us, “In the beginning,” or, “When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep.” Our poetic imagination helps us to see God making order out of chaos and beginning to create the building blocks of life. Light separates from darkness, day from night, sky from ocean. Earth emerges from water, oxygen-producing plants begin to appear, and then animals, and finally humans. And a central feature of this activity is that God says. God said, “Let there be light,” and God’s word makes it so. The speech act *is* the creative act.

And the prologue to John’s gospel articulates the place of Christ in this creative act. He says, calling back to Genesis, “In the beginning.” “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” If God’s word creates the universe, then Christ the Word of God is the vehicle through which the world is created. People are often confused by this; I know I was, initially. Wasn’t Jesus born about 2000 years ago? And didn’t he die relatively soon afterward, about 33 years?

So yes, it is important to our understanding of Jesus Christ as a fully human being that he has a birthdate, which we celebrated a little over a week ago, and a death date, which is coming up in about three months’ time. But, being fully God as well, Jesus’ immortality doesn’t just move in one direction, after resurrection, but back in time toward the infinite past: “He was in the beginning with God,” we hear. God can’t be located in time but rather is the Lord of all time.

So “all things came into being through the Word, and without him not one thing came into being.” In fact the word ποίησις, from which we get our

word *poetry*, means “to bring into being.” Jesus Christ, the Word of God, is a poet, and what has come into being through him, we might say—the universe and all that is found there—is an ongoing poem. Do you believe me? Trees and rocks and mushrooms and microbes and nebulae. It’s all a magnificent poem.

And then this Word, this maker, this poet, became flesh and lives among us. Not just taking on human form, not just acting like a person, but became flesh. With the same drives and imperatives, the same senses of touch and taste and vision. John’s gospel will continue to emphasize this with wine and bread and water. The Word-as-flesh will become a frail baby and will die a human death before being raised in glory.

Because just at the moment of wonder, the high-soaring language of the Word as God, Jesus is also completely and fully incarnate, an earth-dweller who will redeem all creation. As Margaret Daly-Denton writes: “‘The word became flesh,’ with all flesh’s implications of interconnectedness within the whole biotic community of life on Earth.”<sup>1</sup>

The Son, himself God, full of grace and truth, gives power to become children of God to *anyone* who wants this, in other words to anyone who receives him. It doesn’t matter who you are or how much money you have. It doesn’t matter what you’ve done in the past or what ambitions you have or don’t have for the future. What matters is that the true light, which enlightens everyone, has come and is coming into the world, just as it was in John’s time. Diana Butler Bass calls this second story of creation in John “a sacred unfolding of cosmic purpose toward peace, love, and justice.”<sup>2</sup>

We know now that stars make up only two percent of the mass of the universe, and yet they provide effectively 100 percent of its light. “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.” When powers of greed and might seem arrayed against those of justice and mercy, remember that a single candle in a dark hall can illuminate the way.

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Daly-Denton, *John: An Earth Bible Commentary: Supposing Him to Be the Gardener* (New York: T&T Clark, 2017), 35.

<sup>2</sup> “Sunday Musings: In the beginning” *The Cottage*, 28 Dec 2025.

And if it is tempting to perceive in the unfathomably large scale of the universe a God who can't possibly know or care about you, Jesus Christ manifests the true workings of the Divine. "No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, himself God, who is close to the Father's heart"—actually in the Father's bosom or breast—"who has made him known." This love story of Father and Son, soaring beyond the limits of time and space, spills over in the most intimate way into your life and mine.

God will stop at nothing, will go to any lengths, beyond the length and breadth of the expanding universe, to make you God's own child. And neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor powers of this world can separate you from that love, ever.

The light shines in the darkness, and darkness will not overtake it.

Amen.