

Living in the Light of Eternity
John 15:5-8
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The year was 1610 and Galileo trained his telescope on the heavens. **[Galileo Pic]** The world was in for a shock, for what was previously known only by the observation of unaided eyesight was being magnified. That was only the beginning of telescopes and centuries of development that brought an increasingly powerful array of them located in strategic observatories. In 1990 the Hubble satellite telescope was launched **[Hubble Pic]** and deep space was viewed as never before (Edwin Hubble born 1889 in Marshfield, Missouri!). The light of the distant past was captured by astronomy and with it an amplified story of the vast and expanding universe. Consider this picture taken by the Hubble just twelve days ago of the Andromeda Spiral Galaxy **[Andromeda Pic]**

All this, of course, is predicated on *looking* into the starry, starry night, and we can hear echoes of it in the Psalmist: “When I consider your heavens, the

work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have ordained, what is the human being, that you are mindful of him? (Psalm 8:3-4)

Looking into the deep universe and deep time via the speed and spectra of light yields one kind of partial knowledge, but what scientists have discovered is something so obvious that you can easily miss it: There is more space between light emitting objects than the objects themselves – much more space. In fact, most of the universe is what is called dark matter and is invisible to the eye. So how in the world do you access this mysterious and dark majority of the hidden universe and its dense past? You *listen* to it.

Radio astronomy utilizes a curved dish antenna to receive and amplify discrete wavelengths, signals of invisible radiation beyond the visual or auditory range of sensory perception. Since the 1990s this has expanded into an incredibly ambitious project to listen to the universe. The *Square Kilometer Array* (SKA) project is guided by twelve nations and is designing an array of hundreds of networked radio

dish antennae to listen with a capacity 10,000 times greater than is available now. Already the first dishes are up and more are on the way [**MereKat Antenna Pic**].

When completed during the 2020s the array of radio antennae will be positioned in locations that provide the best atmospheric conditions and acoustics in the Southern Hemisphere for listening to the universe without distortion – Australia and Southern Africa [**SKA Pic**]. This global project is the largest terrestrial science experiment ever undertaken. The combined data will no doubt clarify and change our very understanding of the cosmos.

Much of the elegance and mystery of the universe may be known through what we can see. But most of it is found in the dark space between what can be seen, in the space where we must listen. The great spiritual traditions have always intuitively known this through the knowing of faith, whether it be through the Psalmist or an artist such as Van Gogh [**Starry Starry night pic**].

The language of faith speaks of the seen and unseen, known and unknown, light and dark, word and silence. In terms of the Divine Presence there is what is revealed and known and that which is hidden and unknown. And what I want to suggest today is that though the origins and methods of faith and science are different, they share a common wonder and curiosity about the universe in which we find ourselves. [**Back to Live Video Projection**]

In that spirit, I invite you to read the sacred text before us as though we are riding the Hubble telescope at the same time. As we hear the lofty words from John's Gospel also listen for the dark energy we are hearing through our giant radio antennae. Look and listen for God.

"I am the vine and you are the branches ... apart from me you can do nothing." John soars high and presents us with one of the most mysterious, transcendent, and awe-inspiring ideas imaginable.

In the agrarian area where these words were written the image of vineyards was a common one. And everyone who knew about vineyards knew that the vine dresser tended the vines so that the branches and clusters of grapes were nourished and fed by their strong connection. Apart from the connection to the life-giving vine they couldn't exist.

It is not hard to understand how the image of the vine also became a powerful metaphor for the source of life. And that is how John described the relationship of Jesus to his followers or of God to the faithful – by use of that metaphor - as a vine and its branches. You are who you are by virtue of being connected to the vine, the source of all.

Has it ever occurred to you that the spiral growth of a vine – its natural pattern – is found everywhere? From spiral galaxies to sea shells, the spiral is the shape of growth and eternity. And when you read mystics such as Teresa of Avila (*Interior Castle*), she describes the inner life in these terms, as a sacred spiral castle of the soul, a large spiral that winds from the outer chambers to the radiant center. No

wonder that when we walk Labyrinths and wind toward the center we feel connected to the universe and our inner life in a way we can't quite describe. I am the vine and you are the branches. On the basis of this I want to offer you a meditative paradox, something that can warm your heart forever though perhaps causes your mind to ache just a little (!). This paradox of the vine has to do with the very, very small and the very, very large.

Let me begin in a different place, just to warm you up. Robert Laughlin is professor of physics at Stanford and received the Nobel Prize in physics. He makes some remarkable new physics claims that keep our heads spinning. Strangely and perhaps unintentionally on his part they connect strongly with the kind of mysticism that the Gospel of John presents.

The way that Laughlin puts it with physics is this: The search of physics has taken us from the examination of the tiniest building blocks of the universe on the sub-atomic level and that strange, strange quantum world all the way to a search for

the ultimate cause of all things on the macro level – to infinite time and space. The mystery was extended from micro to macro, the tiniest to the largest, the unimaginably largest and timeless. And that search and discovery, says Laughlin, has only led to more mystery, more infinite mystery any way you look at it (*A Different Universe*, 208).

And so here is your spiritual meditation: The Vine of Christ is to be found in the depths of your soul and the infinity of the universe all at the same time. Connect the dots between your most personal interior experiences of the Spirit with your awe-filled connection to the unimaginably vast cosmos of which we are a part. From the inner whispers of the heart to the groaning of the universe's dark energy, we are connected: "I am the vine and you are the branches." The same infinite vine is at once the vine of the soul and the vine of the cosmos.

The Gospel of John doesn't try to give explanation to the eternity of Christ, but only says He is for us the Vine, the Vine of the Soul and Vine of the Cosmos, and to live in harmony with the Vine, to

stay connected to the Vine, is to feel, to look and listen, to the depths of the cosmos and the depths of ourselves, to drop to our knees before the starry, starry night, to contemplate the infinity of time and space until we run out of numbers and logic collapses, to finally, in the end, find our peace and rest by no other thing than knowing we are, indeed, branches of the eternal Vine, connected in a spiral of life with a holy fire in the center.