

My brother, Randy, is gifted in both the Arts and the Sciences. He’s got synapses firing on both the left and right sides of his brain. This is why, as you heard if you were here on Christmas Eve, friends of our parents gave him the game “Mastermind” for Christmas when we were boys, while I received a game called “Blockhead.”

He recently wrote a kind of modern Psalm called “*21st Century Psalmist Views The Hubble Ultra Deep Field.*” Randy has an 8-inch reflector telescope; he loves to search for galaxies at night. He wrote the Psalm after studying photographs of the Hubble Ultra Deep Field, which as he says in his author’s note,

“is a composite photograph of a tiny section of the sky in the constellation Fornax, taken by the Hubble Space Telescope. The photographed area is no bigger than a one millimeter square held one meter away, equaling one thirteen-millionth of the total area of the sky. It shows an estimated 10,000 galaxies. Scientists believe the density of galaxies is the same in every direction.”

The Hubble Ultra Deep Field reminded him of the psalmists praising God for the grandeur of His creation, and caused him to wonder how a modern psalmist might respond, given the our current astronomical resources. Here is his offering, art produced from science.

*Who made the galaxies and set them whirling into the void?
Like grains of sand he scattered them, galaxies upon galaxies,
like milkweed on the wind, like flecks of foam on the sea.*

*As easily as a child spins a top, or blows on a pinwheel,
he set them revolving, each a universe in itself,
an eddy of light in the ocean of space, each with its cargo of stars and worlds,
and passengers peering into the dark.*

*Look in any direction, train the most powerful telescope,
focus the strongest lens, sound the deepest depths, there is no end.*

*Like a boy tossing a toy disk, he flung them, spiraling into the furthest reaches,
cartwheeling through eternity to the uttermost edges of creation.*

The scope of God’s creative work is astonishing. More astonishing yet is God’s love for us on Earth, a small planet among the galaxies upon galaxies, “this fragile earth, our island home” as we say in one of the Prayer Book’s communion prayers.

The Creator of all chose to become one of us, to come to this world, because –as the Bible tells us – “God so loved the world.”

As the Hubble Ultra Deep Field shows us, He created worlds – worlds upon worlds. It is clear that God is interested in material creation. So in a real sense, God is worldly, God is earthy. You might even say that God is crunchy - Jesus did wear sandals after all! God is interested in the corporal and the material: the earth, the world, and the people who live on it.

There is a persistent misunderstanding about God and Christianity. It is that God is only interested in something called your “spiritual life”. I’m not exactly sure what your “spiritual life” is, but I’m pretty sure it has something to do with praying, reading the Bible, going to church, and trying to be pious. And I’m also pretty sure that your “spiritual life” understood this way has relatively little to do with your actual life that you live when you go to work or a Super Bowl Party or you put money in your retirement account, or leave here today and go get a Bodo’s Bagel.

The false dichotomy between the spiritual and the material is, in fact, a long - standing heresy called Gnosticism. Gnostics believe that the body is bad, the desires of your flesh are inherently evil, the earth is a distraction, and you should spend your life working on your spirituality. I’ll be honest - talk of spirituality makes me vaguely anxious.

When people tell me about somebody and say, “She is a really spiritual person”, I want to make sure I’m gone when that person comes in the room. Just give me a flesh and blood, run of the mill sinner any day. In other words, the kind of person Jesus was interested in when He came to earth. At least we’ll have something in common to talk about. I’m just saying.

And I’m not the only one just saying. Jesus is just saying in today’s gospel that His followers are not to be cloistered off engaged in spiritual exercises. He says that we are to be the “*salt of the earth.*” And if we lose our saltiness for the sake of the earth and the regular people who inhabit the earth, then we are basically just taking up space.

You are the salt of the earth. I take this to mean that God wants us to be engaged in life, connected to the world that He so loved and so loves. Poet Richard Wilbur wrote a poem called “*Love Calls Us To The Things Of This World.*” In the poem a man is on the cusp of waking from sleep.

You know that moment, when you just want to stay oblivious to the demands that rush in like wild animals. That moment when “*the soul shrinks from all that it is about to remember.*” The temptation is to stay cloistered, away from the world.

To stay hidden in the salt- shaker, rather than shaken out into the world. Yet, as the title indicates, “Love calls us to the things of this world.” You are the salt of the earth.

So half awake, he sees white sheets hanging on a laundry line outside his window. He dreams/imagines the drying laundry are angels, “*some are in bed - sheets, some are in blouses, some are in smocks.*” It is a vision of the spiritual becoming material, of God taking on flesh. And so he rises from his bed and as his soul accepts his waking body and says of the angel-laundry, “*Bring them down from their ruddy gallows; let their be clean linen for the backs of thieves; let lovers go fresh and sweet to be undone; And the heaviest nuns walk in a pure floating of dark habits, keeping their difficult balance.*” Love calls us to the things of this world: to thieves and lovers and nuns; each one, like you, a sinner in need of love.

You are the salt of the earth. It is a description of who you are, with you’re particular likes, interests, and vulnerabilities. Remember, Jesus doesn’t say, “Go be the salt.” He says, “You are the salt of the earth.” Jesus isn’t giving you marching orders to go start. What is it that you actually like to do? Or what are the everyday things that you just need to do, like vacuuming or calling your mother?

Because you have been saved by grace through faith, you already are the salt, in your own peculiar kind of way. You can close up shop on your striving to be “spiritual.” You don’t have to climb up to heaven, because Heaven came down to you. God, the materialist, took on the material of skin and bones and feet and hands and heart. And as he was nailed to the hard wood of a cross, he cried, “It is finished.” What’s finished is the business of spirituality. What’s left is just the business of your regular life. As they say in the Southwest Airline ads, “*You are now free to move about the country.*”

The material nature of God continues even after death. I met with a woman in her 80’s the other week. Her earthly body is giving way and she is contemplating her death. She’d been reading an excellent book by N.T. Wright about heaven and was thrilled to discover that the afterlife has nothing to do with puffy clouds and floating, bodiless spirits. Instead, she discovered that God so loved this world that He is going to redeem this world – that our new existence will in a way be more materially real than our current life. A new heaven and a new earth, earthier than this one ever was.

Martin Luther once said, “Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree.” Yes, of course, even as you go plant your own version of an apple tree - read your Bible and pray your prayers and come to church. But this is just life, not spiritual life. So, even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces – and it might, for no one knows when

Jesus will return to create a new heaven and a new earth - I would still watch the Superbowl tonight while eating a big bowl of steaming hot chili that our Youth Group is selling today!

Amen.