

Transfiguration C
Peace, Seattle
February 14, 2010 epk
Luke 9:28-43

Pale Blue Dot

This week marks the 20th anniversary of a space photograph that, at first glance, seems to show nothing at all. But if you look closely at the dark canvass, you can just make out a tiny speck of light. That speck is the Earth, seen from nearly 4 billion miles away.¹

This was the Earth—our Earth—as no human eye had ever seen it before.

And what's more, an accidental reflection off the Voyager 1 spacecraft as it took the photo made it look as though the pale blue dot was being lit up by a glowing beam of light.

The Apollo astronauts had taken photos that showed the Earth as a big blue marble, swirling with clouds and continents.² But this picture showed the smallness of Earth in the vastness of space.

Astronomer Carl Sagan tried to express how he felt about this photo in his book *Pale Blue Dot*:³

Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives...every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every 'superstar,' every 'supreme leader,' every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there — on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

When God gazes upon Earth, among all the stars and galaxies and worlds that make up this vast universe, does God behold, as we do in that photo, our incredible, fragile vulnerability?

This view of our Earth home is light-years beyond what our ancestors could have imagined. And even we, who can see it with our own eyes, find it hard to grasp, for the very reasons Sagan suggests.

It's a perspective that, one would think, has the potential to change everything by revealing to us how infinitesimally small our tiny, pale blue dot truly is against the backdrop of a dark void that goes on forever.

But that potential has yet to be realized. And until it is, we will continue to divide up the pale blue dot, and go to war over what belongs to whom, and who should be in charge of what. We will continue to foul our air and soil our waters, and compromise the very conditions that, after billions of years of preparation, enabled that pale blue dot to become (as God intended) a habitable place—a garden planet.

In their book on leadership, Martin Linsky and Ronald Heifetz talk about the importance of getting a “balcony view.” Of getting off the dance floor of work or life to gain a perspective above it, from the balcony, where you can view patterns and relationships that simply aren't apparent to you when you're down on the floor engaged in the flow of the dance.⁴

¹ The story of the “Pale Blue Dot” photo taken by the Voyager spacecraft is taken from an NPR story by [Nell Greenfieldboyce](#) entitled *An Alien View Of Earth*. Go to: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=123614938&ps=cprs>

² Check out some of the Apollo photos, along with others, at: <http://www.spaceimages.com/earth.html>

³ *Pale Blue Dot*. Random House: New York, © 1994 Carl Sagan.

⁴ *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading*. [Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002.]

WELL, THE PHOTO OF EARTH AS THAT PALE BLUE DOT SUSPENDED IN A BEAM OF LIGHT IS THE ULTIMATE BALCONY VIEW!

When Jesus took Peter, James and John up the mountain with him to pray that day, I wonder if he wasn't trying to give them a BALCONY VIEW.

While they are there, they become party to a vision of Jesus bathed in a light-beam of his own, and they find themselves speechless.

After the experience, after seeing what they saw and hearing what they heard, Luke tells us, they could find no words to describe what had happened: AND THEY KEPT SILENT AND IN THOSE DAYS TOLD NO ONE ANY OF THE THINGS THEY HAD SEEN. [Luke 9:36b]

How do you talk about things for which there are no words?

How do you talk about experiences when there are no adequate descriptors?

How do you talk about a divine Love so immense and yet so particular that, “EVEN THE HAIRS OF YOUR HEADS ARE NUMBERED...” (?) [Matthew 10:30]

...a Love so committed It said:

I'M GOING TO MAKE MYSELF SMALL ENOUGH TO LIVE ON THAT PALE BLUE DOT. (?)

...a Love so profound that, “THOUGH HE WAS IN THE FORM OF GOD, HE DID NOT REGARD EQUALITY WITH GOD AS SOMETHING TO BE EXPLOITED, BUT EMPTIED HIMSELF, TAKING THE FORM OF A SLAVE, BEING BORN IN HUMAN LIKENESS. AND BEING FOUND IN HUMAN FORM, HUMBLING HIMSELF AND BECAME OBEDIENT TO THE POINT OF DEATH—EVEN DEATH ON A CROSS.” (?) [Phil. 2:6-8]

How do you grasp Love like that? We can't...but we try anyway...we tell stories...and we live stories.

Some of the stories that I have brushed up against in the past couple months, powerful stories, come from people in this congregation.

I think of our brothers, Elmer and Bill, walking beside their loves of 50, 60+ years, Irene and Dorothy, who are both facing long odds in their struggles for health.

What future awaits them is unclear; they're taking it one day at a time, firm in their conviction that though their future may be unclear they know the One who holds the future, and they know that One is walking beside them.

It's a struggle! But they keep on putting one foot in front of the other; keep on loving, faithfully, fulfilling their vows and meeting the challenges of each new day with the accompaniment they receive from others and the best that they can bring. **How's that for a Valentine's Day story?**

And little Blake Arnold, whom we baptize today!

A scant couple weeks after he was born we learned he has cystic fibrosis. It's not fair!

It's not fair, but it is. And Deirdre and Gered, with a resilience that blows me away—are choosing hope.

And we are choosing it with them. And today they're bringing Blake to the font where his story will be wrapped and enfolded in Jesus' story and Jesus' journey from life to death to life once more.

In Luke's telling of the Transfiguration story, there is one symbol that stands out for me—the great cloud that envelops the mountain and strikes terror into the hearts of the disciples.

Now a cloud is one of the older symbols of God's presence in the Scriptures.

- It was God's presence in the cloud that greeted the newly freed slaves from Egypt as they received the covenant at Mt. Sinai.
- And it was God's presence in the cloud that guided and accompanied the Hebrew children as they made their way through the wilderness years.

By obscuring God, the cloud preserves the mystery; but it also protects the people from being overwhelmed by the Divine Presence which is beyond their ken and ability to survive if they saw it face to face.

But why this symbol today on Transfiguration Sunday? Why, at the culmination of the season when we've celebrated Jesus as the Light of the world, do we end up in the clouds?

Perhaps Paul said it best when he said, "Now we see dimly, then we will see face to face; now we know in part, then we will know fully, even as we have been fully known." [1 Cor 13:12-13]

Sisters and Brothers, there are mysteries in our relationship with God that we simply cannot unravel. There are experiences and questions that defy our ability to understand.

When the cloud settles in rather than clears, the mysteries are deepened. But these mysteries in and of themselves do not and should not keep us from living and acting in the faith that God still accompanies us and wills our good!

No sooner do Jesus and the three head down from the mountain than they are confronted once more with life on the pale blue dot; and the particular biography of a boy whose life has been a living hell.

Jesus, impatient with his disciples, or with the bystanders or with the situation itself—we don't know exactly which—rebukes the unclean spirit, heals the boy, and gives him back to his father.

The dark spirit which possessed the boy and framed his young life as one that was doomed, is now vanquished. **The boy is given back his true self, and with it, his future.**

When Blake Arnold is washed in the waters today his truest self, imaged by God, will be reborn, and his future will be given back to him again—only it won't be the same, for it will be a future compassed by a Light which no night, no matter how bleak, and no diagnosis, no matter how grim, can overcome.

We all are voyagers together on that tiny speck of blue light suspended in the darkness. And we are not alone.

When God gazes upon Earth, among all the stars and galaxies and worlds that make up this vast universe, God beholds our incredible, fragile vulnerability. And holding it, and holding us, fully and

gently and firmly in his hands, God whispers: I LOVE YOU...I LOVE YOU...ABIDE IN MY LOVE...
AND ALL WILL BE WELL.

Amen.