Advent in the New Universe Story 2020

From the beginning of the world, but particularly through the incarnation, the mystery of Christ is at work in a hidden manner in the natural world as a whole, without thereby impinging on its autonomy. *Laudato Si’* (par. 99)
Advent in the New Universe Story

Overview
This Advent program provides an opportunity for Christians to deepen their understanding of the Christmas and Incarnation reality in the context of the New Universe Story. We no longer live in a world with God "above." This requires some basic rethinking 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 to enable believers to understand Incarnation within cosmic history. These pages contain a few of their insights.

These are the four topics in this Advent resource:
- New Consciousness, New Christian Understanding
- The Cosmos Prepares for New Life
- Evolving Understanding of Humanity's Place in Creation
- Incarnation Revisited

Preparation
Adapt this material in any way that facilitates your group's prayerful reflection, faith sharing, community building, and deepened appreciation of the Incarnation. Make copies on sustainable paper using both sides. Decide if hymns will be used; if so, have words available.

Place an Advent wreath or other traditional symbol(s) of Advent for a centerpiece. If needed, have name cards for each participant. (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.) Be sure all participants know when and where to meet, and that each has made a four-week commitment to participate.

First Meeting
Begin with introductions, share why individuals chose to participate, and skim the pages. Find out if the group wants refreshments and, if so, how they will be provided. Make sure participants know that creation began about 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. Stop in time to complete the closing and to socialize.

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.

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 repent; the actual meaning of which, in Greek, is rethink or reconsider. In Scripture, the application is to rethink your sins, but that implies an ever-deeper awareness of the divine presence. How does God live and act among us in our time? How do we incarnate the Mystery we call Christ in our time? 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 "rethinking" required of Mary as she pondered the ramifications of her affirmative reply. 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 to ponder.

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." On Christmas Eve 1968, Apollo 8 astronauts took the iconic photo shown here. What “new idea(s)” has that photograph “let loose” in you?
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 repenting — rethinking — what many once believed was historical truth.

In *Laudato Si’*, Pope Frances wrote: “We lack an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared by everyone … A great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal.” (LS par. 202) 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 learning, sharing, grappling, trusting in God's help to move into a new understanding of Holy Mystery and of ourselves in creation. What better time to foster this new life than in Advent?

**Sharing:** What sentence above calls you to prayerful pondering?

How has your understanding of creation changed since your childhood?

**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). Next week we’ll share your reflections.

**Optional:** Hymn

**Suggestions for reading:**
Week Two: The Cosmos Prepares for New Life

Sharing: 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-expanding 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, our Solar System coalesced and our Mother Earth evolved, rotating around a star in the Milky Way Galaxy.

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 $10^{28}$ [10 to the 28th power; 28 0’s after the first 10] atoms is returning to the world outside, and ninety-eight percent of them are replaced annually." (David S. Toolan, S.J.) These facts call us to repent (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, S. J.) At each moment, the Spirit of God anoints us and all creation on Earth and in the cosmos.

Pause to ponder.

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 in the readings today. 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)

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 understanding 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 this week?

How do you image the Holy Spirit?

**Optional:** Hymn

**Suggestions for reading:**
Week Three: Evolving Understanding of Human’s Place in Creation

Sharing: 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)

Like all life, humans began with what is believed to be the Flaring 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 roughly 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 different from, and superior to, everything else. In this model of creation, independence and survival of the fittest governed individual and group actions. The first Garden account of creation fits this mindset: humans are superior to the rest of creation and charged with its dominion.

Within the past century, scholars of many disciplines — including theology — have discovered that creation has always been relational, interdependent, cooperative, 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 dirt, adamah, and forms humans from it. God's breath (Spirit) animates adam — whom we call 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 have the capacity and privilege to 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 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 co-create it with deeper love.

Sharing: What insights from Christianity are important in shaping Earth’s evolution? Thursday, December 21, is Winter Solstice in the Northern Hemisphere. What connection do you find between the Winter Solstice — whenever it comes in your hemisphere — and Christmas?


Optional: Hymn

Suggestions for reading:
- Ilia Delio, editor, From Teilhard to Omega: Co-creating an Unfinished Universe. (Orbis, 2014).
Week Four: Incarnation Revisited

Sharing: Share any relevant insights from Week Three or thoughts about Winter Solstice.

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 II said: “Respect for life and the dignity of the human person extends also to the rest of creation.” Pope Francis writes, “Mary, the Mother who cared for Jesus, now cares with maternal affection and pain for this wounded world … we can ask her to enable us to look at this world with eyes of wisdom.” (Laudato Si’ par. 241)

**Sharing:** What sentence above might influence your Christmas prayer?
Share one word that sums up for you these Advent meetings.

**Closing:** Advent or Christmas Hymn. Exchange Christmas wishes.

**Suggestions for reading:**

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