

“And the Earth Moved”

Psalm 8; Colossians 1:15-23 ¹

This morning I’m going to attempt to take you on a whirlwind tour of time, using an outline organized around five cataclysmic events: Creation; Collision; Crucifixion; Conquest; and Completion. To begin with, please turn in your worship order to the panel with the two photographs. We’re going to start with the top one as we think about CREATION.

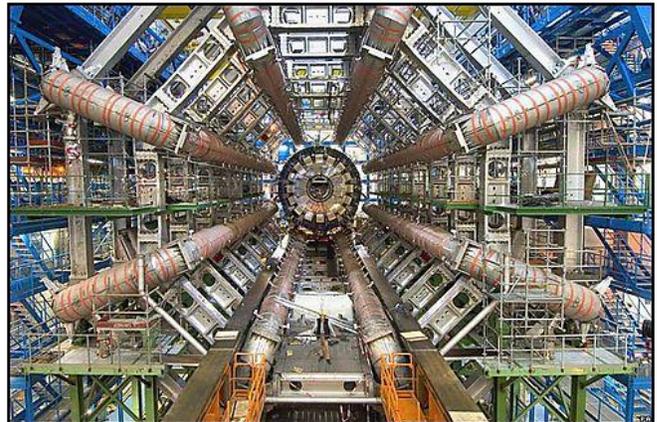
That photograph is known as The Hubble Ultra Deep Field. This photograph, taken by NASA’s Hubble Space Telescope during 400 orbits around Earth, penetrates nearly to the theoretical limit of visible light, and reveals the composition of a small slice of the universe “only” 800 million years after that mind-boggling explosion astrophysicists understate as “the Big Bang.”²

Eight hundred million years is a span beyond our comprehension, but to go back that near the Big Bang covers ninety-four percent of the 13.73 billion years since our universe began. Even more amazing, as of the seventh day of this month, NASA’s Wilkinson Microwave Anisotropy Probe has penetrated to within 380,000 years of creation, which is 99.997 percent of the entire history of the universe (see illustration at the end).³



Because astronomers can now say with confidence that they’ve witnessed essentially all of cosmic history, they can also say with confidence that the universe has been expanding continuously and at an accelerating rate since the moment of creation, with some parts of the universe now moving away from us at speeds greater than the speed of light.⁴

Now let’s look for a moment at the second picture. This is a photo of part of the Large Hadron Collider, or LHC, nearing completion near Geneva, Switzerland (notice the man at the bottom of the picture for scale). The LHC is the largest particle accelerator in the world, an underground doughnut nineteen miles in circumference that will, only a few weeks from now, begin accelerating beams of subatomic particles to nearly the speed of light.



The LHC will use thousands of huge magnets, cooled to nearly absolute zero, to guide

¹ A sermon by Dr. David Stancil, delivered at the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia on March 23, 2008.

² <http://hubblesite.org/newscenter/archive/releases/2004/07/image/a/>

³ <http://map.gsfc.nasa.gov/news/>

⁴ Hugh Ross, *Creation as Science: A Testable Model Approach to End the Creation/Evolution Wars* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006), pp. 49, 85-86. <http://curious.astro.cornell.edu/question.php?number=575>

particle beams in a vacuum greater than that of outer space. When these light-speed beams collide, they will create temperatures above two trillion degrees, recreating conditions within the first few milliseconds of the Big Bang. These incredible efforts are being undertaken in hope of finding, among other things, the Higgs boson, an elusive particle that is thought to determine why things weigh something rather than nothing.⁵

The second part of our outline, COLLISION, is equally mind-boggling. Our planet is approximately 4.57 billion years old. At some point in its first fifty million years Earth was hit at a forty-five degree angle by an object the size of Mars, traveling at the surprisingly slow speed of about three miles per second. Astronomer Hugh Ross has observed that “This crash resulted in a planet with its surface gravity, surface temperature, atmospheric composition, atmospheric pressure, iron abundance, tectonics, volcanism, rotation rate, rate of decline in rotation rate, and stable rotation axis tilt *all* in the just-right range to support advanced life.”⁶

It was this collision that formed our Moon, and astronomers have calculated that if the Moon’s mass was larger or smaller by only two percent, or if Earth’s distance from the Sun varied as much as one percent, life on Earth as we know it would not be possible.⁷ Considering such matters as these, physicist Freeman Dyson commented, “The more I examine the universe and study the details of its architecture, the more evidence I find that the universe in some sense must have known that we were coming.”⁸ Others, including astrophysicist Paul Davies, have noted that “It seems as though somebody has fine-tuned nature’s numbers The impression of design is overwhelming.”⁹

The psalmist came to a similar expression of wonder three thousand years sooner: “*When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers—the moon and the stars you set in place—what are people that you should think about them, mere mortals that you should care for them?*” (Psalm 8:3). The answer to that question is our quest this morning.

Hard as it is to imagine, given the unimaginable grandeur of Creation, the Bible tells us that a poor Galilean carpenter, Jesus of Nazareth, *is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation, for through him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can’t see . . . Everything was created through him and for him. He existed before anything else, and he holds all creation together*—“small spinning atoms and stars that shine” as my friend Paula Testerman’s *Resurrection Doxology* puts it in your worship order (Colossians 1:15-17).

This is who Jesus is, and yet *although the world was made through him, the world didn’t recognize him when he came. Even in his own land and among his own people, he was not accepted* (John 1:10-11). But Jesus, though He was God, *did not demand and cling to his rights as God. He made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form he obediently humbled himself even further by dying a criminal’s death on a cross* (Philippians 2:6-8).

Now that’s astounding! And when we consider this morning’s third point, CRUCIFIXION, the Bible tells us that *it was our weaknesses [Jesus] carried [to the cross]; it was our sorrows that weighed him down. And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God for his own sins! But he was wounded and crushed for our sins. He was beaten that we might have peace. He was whipped, and we were healed! All of us have strayed away*

⁵ <http://public.web.cern.ch/public/en/LHC/LHC-en.html>

⁶ Ross, p. 114.

⁷ Ibid, pp. 112-113.

⁸ Freeman J. Dyson, *Disturbing the Universe* (NY: Basic Books, Perseus Books, 1979), p. 250.

⁹ Paul Davies, *The Cosmic Blueprint* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1986), p. 203.

like sheep. We have left God's paths to follow our own. Yet the LORD laid on him the guilt and sins of us all (Isaiah 53:4-6).

At the moment Jesus died, bearing in ways beyond our knowing the horrendous burden of our sin, *the curtain in the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, rocks split apart, and tombs opened. The bodies of many godly men and women who had died were raised from the dead after Jesus' resurrection. They left the cemetery, went into the holy city of Jerusalem, and appeared to many people (Matthew 27:51-53).*

Matthew wasn't even able to wait one sentence after telling us of Jesus' death to tell us also that death could not hold Him! The wonderful Good News that we celebrate this day hinges on the fact that the crucifixion was not the final word. So it is that this morning's fourth word is CONQUEST!

¹ *Early on Sunday morning, as the new day was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went out to visit the tomb. ² Suddenly there was a great earthquake! For an angel of the Lord came down from heaven, rolled aside the stone, and sat on it. ³ His face shone like lightning, and his clothing was as white as snow. ⁴ The guards shook with fear when they saw him, and they fell into a dead faint.*

⁵ *Then the angel spoke to the women. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. ⁶ He isn't here! He is risen from the dead, just as he said would happen. Come, see where his body was lying. ⁷ And now, go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and he is going ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there. Remember what I have told you" (Matthew 28:1-7).*

The Earth shook at its Creation. The Earth shook in ancient Collision. The Earth shook with sorrow when its Creator died. The Earth shook with joy when its Creator vanquished Death. And the Earth will shake once more, when God brings all things in the universe to COMPLETION at the end of time. Here's part of what the Bible tells us about that Day:

~When God spoke from Mount Sinai his voice shook the earth, but now he makes another promise: "Once again I will shake not only the earth but the heavens also." This means that the things on earth will be shaken, so that only eternal things are left (Hebrews 12:26-27).

~Immediately after the anguish of those days, [Jesus said,] the sun will be darkened, the moon will give no light, the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers in heaven will be shaken. And then at last, the sign of the coming of the Son of Man will appear in the heavens, and there will be deep mourning among all the nations of the earth. And they will see the Son of Man arrive on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory (Matthew 24:29-30).

Jesus is *the Lamb who was killed before the world was made (Revelation 13:8)*. Before God ever spoke the Word of Creation that resulted in the Big Bang, Calvary's cross was already in view. Later, when the day of crucifixion came, the Bible tells us that Jesus chose to go to the cross because of the joy awaiting him (Hebrews 12:2).

My friend, Jesus created everything in the heavens and on earth, and he holds all creation together at this very moment. What could possibly be available to Him on the far side of the cross that wasn't available without it? I suggest to you that there's only one thing in the incredible expanse of this universe that Jesus didn't have without the cross: the possibility of spending eternity with you.

Because the fire of God's holiness consumes any sin that comes into God's Presence, you and I, as sinful persons, are forever prevented from experiencing the intimate, eternal relationship with God that God planned for us, and there's nothing we can do about it. But because of God's unbelievable love, *God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ (2 Corinthians 5:21).*

The movie *Antwone Fisher* is the true story of a young man abandoned at birth by an incarcerated woman, and who was raised in abusive orphanages, foster homes, and reform schools. After his 18th birthday, he joins the Navy, where his anger gets him in a lot of trouble. After getting in several fights, Antwone is ordered to undergo counseling, and his psychologist encourages him to find his roots as a way to begin healing.

After several phone calls he reaches an aunt and uncle in Cleveland who escort him to the dilapidated apartment complex where his birth mother lives. A suspicious and aloof woman answers the door. When she realizes that Antwone is her son, the woman retreats to another room and sits down on a soiled couch, crying silently.

Antwone asks for some explanation as to why she never came to rescue him or why she never sought him out. She cannot answer, but simply stares ahead, not daring to look at him, tears rolling down her expressionless face.

He gently kisses her on the cheek as if to say, “I forgive you,” and walks away. As he gets out of the car at his uncle’s house, Antwone feels completely alone in the world. But as he enters the front door, Antwone’s world changes as he’s met by a chorus of cheers from a huge crowd of relatives, all waiting to meet him for the very first time.

There are children, couples, cousins, uncles, and family friends, all smothering him with hugs, slaps on the back, and beaming smiles. The hallway stairs are filled with kids holding up signs with his name scribbled next to smiley faces and rainbows. Antwone slowly takes it all in, overwhelmed.

He is then led into the next room where a grand feast is spread across a long table. The table is overflowing with chicken, mashed potatoes, pancakes, fruit salad—with all the good food you can imagine. The room is prepared for a celebration. For the very first time in his life, Antwone is adored. For the very first time in his life, he belongs.

As Antwone surveys the room, an elderly woman sitting at the end of the table knocks to get his attention and then waves for him to come to her. She slowly raises her arms, grabbing his hands and caressing his face. A tear runs down her cheek as she says with great feeling, “*Welcome.*”¹⁰

My friend, that’s the kind of welcome God plans for you, too. God has engineered this amazing universe with one end in view: spending eternity with you . . . but that will only happen by your own decision.

I asked a question earlier that went like this: “*When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers—the moon and the stars you set in place—what are people that you should think about them, mere mortals that you should care for them?*” (Psalm 8:3). I haven’t really answered the question, because it makes no sense for God to love you and me with the extravagance of this incredible universe and at the price of Calvary. But whether I can answer that question or not, Jesus’ question continues to echo down the corridor of the centuries. It is the central question in all creation: **Who do you say I am?** (Mark 8:29).

¹⁰ *Antwone Fisher*, A Mundy Lane/Todd Black Production, 2002, written by Antwone Fisher and directed by Denzel Washington.

A Resurrection Doxology

All creatures, made by love divine,
Small spinning atoms, Stars that shine,
Praise our Maker! Alleluia!
God's love endures, transcending death
Through Living Word and Spirit's breath.
Praise the Savior, praise the Spirit!
Let Creation echo, hear it:
Alleluia!

Paula Meador Testerman

