Sunday, September 8, 1996
A FAITH FOR THE SPACE AGE
Romans 13:8-14

Not long ago, NASA, our national space agency, announced with some fanfare that its scientists had discovered what they believe to be possible evidence of life in a 4.5 billion-year-old meteorite from Mars that landed on Earth some 13,000 years ago.

Earlier, another announcement at a recent meeting of the American Astronomical Society provided new information on the immensity of the universe. By pointing the Hubble Space Telescope at a minute section of the sky next to the Big Dipper, scientists were permitted a first-ever view of worlds beyond anything earthbound telescopes could have ever provided.

After appropriate calculations based on what they saw through the Hubble Space Telescope, researchers concluded that there are probably more than 50 billion galaxies in the universe.

These days we hear so many large numbers — such as when politicians talk about the national debt — that we don't pay much attention. But consider the implications of there being more than 50 billion galaxies.

We live in the Milky Way galaxy, which contains 50 to 100 billion stars. Earth is a dot, a pinpoint, in this enormous collection of planets, stars, nebulae, and other heavenly bodies. The Milky Way galaxy is so immense that light itself takes thousands of years to cross it. Now scientists tell us that there are more than 50 billion additional galaxies, most so large that they put the Milky Way to shame. According to a number of scientists, all the rapidly accumulating evidence strongly suggests that the universe abounds with planetary systems, something like our own.

These two announcements have caused some commentators to say that many religions and their adherents will now have to re-examine their beliefs — and they're right. Not only will some religious people have to re-examine their doctrines, but non-religious people as well. One thoughtful person suggested that, considering all this, is it any longer appropriate to ask God to find a parking place at the mall? Or as Harry Golden put it in an essay written in the 1950s, "When you think of all this, it's silly to complain when the waitress brought you string beans instead of limas."

For a long time now, we human beings have tended to make ourselves the center of the universe. For example, in the second century, Ptolemy taught that the whole universe rotated around us, with the Earth sitting at the center of all creation.

Years later, Copernicus (1473 — 1543) rudely pointed out that, sorry Earthlings, we spin around the sun, not vice versa. Galileo (1564 — 1642) built a telescope and enlarged our understanding of the creation, confirming what Copernicus had suggested. The authorities of the time sought the only rational solution — they decided to burn Galileo alive if he didn't recant. Eventually, he did.

Galileo's crime was to undermine our belief in the uniqueness of our planet and its inhabitants, and by doing so, he threatened the church's monopoly on defining the universe, the Earth, human beings, and the nature of God.

Over time, as evidenced by the two recent news stories mentioned earlier, our expanding knowledge of the universe has reinforced the insignificance of Earth on a celestial scale and caused us to wonder if we human beings are really so special after all.

Fortunately, we stopped threatening to burn people alive who challenge some of our most comfortable assumptions.

But the pride that makes us insist on a special role for human life on Earth, no matter how immense the universe is, hasn't disappeared. When we say that the conditions for life do not exist on some particular planet, we imply life does not — or could not — exist as we define it.

But what is life? "I'll know it when I see it" is an insufficient answer. Biochemical definitions, which define life in terms of nucleic acids, proteins, and other molecules, are clearly chauvinistic. Carl Sagan says that the definition he likes best is, "Life is any system capable of reproduction, mutation, and reproduction of its mutations." But then he adds, "Even this definition is impractical to apply when we set down a spacecraft on another world. Reproduction may not be done in public, and mutations might be comparatively infrequent."

Furthermore, the fictional extraterrestrials of Star Trek or a hundred other space operas are less alien than many of our neighbors. We make them look like us, only with more outlandish features.

Alien stories that are claimed as true are no better. Why Earth would be such a fascinating place for UFOs to visit is left unexplained. Roswell, New Mexico? Why there instead of somewhere else?

Or consider this: perhaps we surface-dwelling life forms are the exceptions — bizarre mutations of the deep-dwelling forms of life that populate the interiors of planets all over the galaxy. The inside of Mars may be full of them. Who knows what creatures God has created elsewhere?

I don't know about you, but I welcome these new discoveries and theories about the nature of the universe and the speculation that life exists, in whatever form, in other parts of creation. They remind me that all of our ideas and conceptions of God and of God's creation are always too small.

What, then, are some of the implications of these discoveries for a space-age faith? What are some components of that faith?

One essential part of a vital and relevant faith for the space age, as I've just mentioned, is to know that one's understanding of God is always limited and needs room for expansion. The faith that Jesus taught and lived underscores this. He knew that God's truth is continually revealing itself in new ways and that we learn about the nature of God not only from the Bible but from many of life's experiences as well. Jesus invited the people of his day — and invites us — to join him on a spiritual journey where there is always more light and truth to break forth from God's word. That makes life exciting. We do not know it all. There is always more to learn. Who knows what new surprises we might discover in the future?

A second component of a living faith in a space age is to cultivate a sense of humility and mystery in our relationship with God. This includes a sense of wonder and awe as we realize the grandeur of the Infinite all around us.

Some of us experience this response when we look up at the starry heavens, view the majestic mountain peaks of the Rockies, or look across the seemingly endless plains of Nebraska or Kansas. We feel in communion with something greater than ourselves, and the awe engendered prompts a sense of both serenity, challenge, and mystery.

This experience is described in a number of places in the Bible, but especially in the Psalms, the most personal of all the books of the Bible.

One Psalm puts it this way: “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” (Psalm 8:3)

As Christians living in a space age, we acknowledge God as the directing, loving power within all of creation, and at the same time, we find this loving power to be personal within each of us. Power, purpose, and love are flowing through all of creation and in us. That’s above all what Jesus lived and taught. And that makes some of our problems and complaints seem small and petty. Is it really a mistake worth complaining about, as Harry Golden said, if the waitress brings you string beans instead of limas?

This leads to a third component of faith for a space age. As human beings, we encounter joys, pains, and problems, but as Jesus taught, we can open ourselves to allow God’s strength and renewal to flow through us. This God of all creation is also very personal.

That’s especially important because no matter how immense the universe is, or how much wonder and awe we experience, or whether there are forms of life more advanced than ours or more primitive in other galaxies or in our own galaxy, we still have to live and deal with our day-to-day problems.

There are bills to pay, human relationships to work on, the onset of unexpected illnesses, the sudden or slow lingering death of a loved one, the complaints of customers and church members, a payroll to meet, a budget to underwrite — and at home, someone still has to take out the garbage.

So our Christian faith, in addition to giving us a grand perspective and a sense of wonder and awe as we learn more about the immensity of creation, also gives us a way to live day by day, a way to deal with life’s everyday problems. How does it do this? By helping us see the world, creation, and other people in a different way.

Harry Emerson Fosdick liked to say, “There are many ways in which the Christian faith can be described — in terms of its organizations, its doctrines, its ethical principles — but it can also be thought of as a way of looking at things.”

The Christian faith and its trust in a loving, faithful God involve a changed point of view, a new way of seeing things. The importance of this rests on a basic principle: all of life consists of two elements — first, the facts; second, our way of looking at them, our perception, our interpretation. What one person sees as a gift, another sees as a curse. Jesus did his best to help people see God, God’s creation, themselves, and others in a new way. He tried to help them change their way of looking at things. He began many of his teachings with the phrase, “You have heard that it was said of old,” and then he would say, “But I say to you...” and he would give them a new way of seeing things.

When a prospective follower came within range of Jesus, he or she was not asked to subscribe to a formal creed — they were asked to get a new way of seeing things. A new way of seeing money and other possessions, a new way of seeing the Sabbath, of seeing Samaritans, a new way of seeing lepers, outcasts, children, and God. The early followers of Jesus were called “followers of the way.”

The Greek word in the Bible that is often translated into English as “repent” literally means “change your way of looking at things.” That’s what it means to be born again. It is to have a new way of seeing God, the world, oneself, and others.

It makes all the difference in the world. If, for example, it is your practice to see all or most human beings as people you can’t trust, or as your potential enemies, then you will behave one way toward them. If, on the other hand, you see people as children of God, as being loved by God just as you are, as potential friends, then you will treat them in a different way.

When Jesus asked people to get a new way of looking at money and other possessions, he said, “Take heed and beware of covetousness; for a person’s life does not consist in the abundance of things he or she owns.” The world’s way of looking at such things is to get as much as possible and hold on to it. But Jesus said, “Learn to let go. Learn to give.”

The end product of any religious faith in any age is the daily life its followers live. “You will know them by their fruits,” said Jesus. You and I have to cope with day-to-day circumstances that cannot be anticipated in detail but that will surely challenge the best within us.

For those of us who believe in God as Jesus revealed God, we have an outlook based on trust — a trust that there is a meaning and purpose beyond all our fragmentary knowledge and purposes. Faith, or trust in God, means trust in life itself, despite the patches of meaninglessness that sometimes drive us to the edge of despair.

Belief in God is more than belief in God. It is an attitude, a way of looking at life. Each day we face this world, but our lives do not need to be what they were. We have only limited control over the facts and over many of the forces that surround us, but we have a large amount of control over our way of seeing them, over our attitude toward them. And when a person gets a new way of seeing, that person has a new life — and it can be a life of joy and peace.

A faith for the space age! If the astronomers’ revelations have any practical merit, it is this: we need to love and take care of one another in this often hostile and unpredictable world. This is, above all, what Jesus taught and lived. Amen.