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— Mary E. McGann, RSCJ
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Journey of Faith, Journey of the Universe
The Lectionary and the New Cosmology

Ivan Nicoletto, OSB Cam

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Foreword

One of the challenges of the liturgical readings from Scripture is for them to stay fresh—that is, for us, hearing them many times in a lifetime, to continue to listen to them deeply. We may, subconsciously, feel we know them and have little left to learn. An opposite situation arises from the discourse around the so-called new cosmology, where the language and concepts may seem so strange—even forbidding—to us that we can’t find a way in. The very unfamiliarity of the science and philosophy, the geology and physics, may close our ears to what is offered there for us.

*Journey of Faith, Journey of the Universe*, by Ivan Nicoletto, OSB Cam, provides wonderful assistance for each of those challenges. He knows the Scriptures intimately, from both a lifetime of study and the liturgical home in which all the Benedictine traditions live. And he has steeped himself in the world of cosmogenesis, studying with the recognized experts in the field, becoming deft at making the complexities of that new discourse accessible for lay listeners. The reflections provided here integrate these two realms in ways that are both insightful about Scripture and illuminating about the cosmogenesis viewpoint: one of the signs of the times in which we live. The blend is not always easy, and Nicoletto does not delude us into thinking the matter a quick study, that new cosmology is simply standard cosmology refurbished. In the reflections offered here, Nicoletto chooses his language with great care, each word helping us to understand more clearly and deeply the insights he would share. Though each homily stands on its own, readers will hear, over the span of them, certain themes repeated and reexpressed, able to open the
Scripture reading in ways that will surprise and please. Cosmogenesis challenges Christians’ long-established sense of a personal God. And yet, as we read on, we can feel consoled that the classic and intense imagery of so many biblical passages is deeply suitable to our Universe—multiverse—identity and roots. Pushing us beyond our traditional sense of stewardship and human governance of the world to a deeper and more respectful sense of our place within creation, we learn how deeply suited is the biblical tradition to much of what we hear emerging in the cosmological conversation. Christian believers will find themselves challenged by both the liturgical readings and the fresh cosmology to a more intense ethical praxis. We can think of no better way for third-millennium Christians to be drawn into the stories that shape our lives in ways we have, perhaps, scarcely begun to understand than to explore the great mystery in which all creation-partners live.

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How do we interpret the Scripture in light of the new Universe story? How do we participate with our lives in the creative and sacred Action who continues to be at work in the evolutionary process of the world? These two questions are at the origin of this book, *Journey of Faith, Journey of the Universe*, which aims to interweave the discovery of the immensity of our expanding Universe, the Word that every Sunday is proclaimed in our congregations, and the involvement of the entire Earth community in this ongoing and unfinished creation.

I am very grateful for the help, appreciation, and encouragement that I have received from many people. In particular I thank Sr. Barbara Green, OP, who first spurred me to embark on this project that she has supported all along the way, and to Liturgical Press, which consented to the adventure. I express my deepest appreciation to Kristin Burke, who has consistently edited with care during these last three years the texts that now appear in unity. I am thankful to Carrie Rehak for her inexhaustible enthusiasm and passion that make things happen. Last but not least, my deepest acknowledgment to my monastic community of Incarnation Monastery, especially Fr. Andrew Colnaghi, that allowed me to prepare, voice, and offer these meditations.

As we learn from the story of the Universe, nothing grows in isolation and selfishness, but everything unfolds in connection, relationship, and interdependence. In the same way I am indebted to many travel companions that have enlightened, widened, and inspired my perspective. I desire to mention especially Brian T. Swimme and Mary
Evelyn Tucker—whose book, *Journey of the Universe*, has inspired the title and the fervor of the present volume—as well as Judy Cannato, Elizabeth A. Johnson, Ilia Delio, Richard Rohr, and Caroline Baker. The reader who wants to engage with their works will find a list at the end of the book called “Inspirational Sources.”

Finally, I hope that the reader may discover oneself to be part of the great flow that began with the big bang of matter, and enveloped in life, consciousness, and love. Above all, I wish that we may consent to welcome the ineffable Mystery peeping out in our own lives, calling us to participate in a cosmic and eucharistic banquet that draws together all existing beings.
Advent comes today with an engrossing and unsettling call for us: *Prepare the way.* Isn’t it a surprise to discover ourselves solicited not just to walk along a path already trod, tested, and known, but *to become a way* for something or someone unknown and uncontainable, who is about to come into the world, thanks to the welcoming space we prepare? We are not irrelevant or uniform matter of the world. Each one of us, no matter where and how we are, is involved in the possibility of this coming, asked to become channels of such manifestations of justice, compassion, and peace. And we are not alone in this risky preparation that presses in upon the present. We have been preceded by a *myriad* of beings. We are called in the wake of Noah and Abraham, Jesse, David, and Isaiah, Ruth, Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary the beloved, and the passionate believers of all ages, races, religions, and cultures.

We could say that the *entire* creation, from the initial, great flaring forth, is *preparing the way,* is involved in a birthing process. Perhaps the world is this perennial, incomplete, unfulfilled birth that is about to happen at every moment, thanks to earthly and celestial beings: light and water, sun and moon, stars and trees, birds, cow, calf, lion, and asp, together with our technologies and arts. We are part of an enormous, continuous birth from matter, to life, to consciousness, to self-consciousness, and to love. All creatures are preparing the way, participating in the birth of Christ who was, is, and is to come. We are also involved in birthing Christ, now that Jesus has performed his song of love, has released his Spirit upon us, and has sent us to incarnate the advent of love in any appropriate and inappropriate circumstances.
Christ is on his way of fulfillment through everybody, widening through us, in an all-embracing and creative compassion. However, we experience this not as an easy birth. The preparation wails through the birth pangs, contradictions, and conflicts of the world. We know there are wounds, demises, hostilities, deadlocks, darkness, resistances, failures, and cries at every stage of the journey of the Universe, of our personal and communal history. There are despairs such as those mentioned by the prophet Isaiah, when a small group of people goes back from Babylon to a destroyed Jerusalem: Who will have the courage to go back, to start, to sow, to hope again? Likewise, there is an anesthetized and lifeless religion in the holy city of Jerusalem at the time of John the Baptist. The religious leaders are lulling themselves in the comfort zone of rules, privileges, and power: Who will embody the passionate and transformative power of the hidden Source of all creativity and compassion?

We also live in threatening times at this turning point in our global civilization. Forces of consumptions, injustice, oppression, and exclusion are working against efforts to build a life-sustaining society and are destroying planet Earth. Who will embody the radical transformations we so urgently need? What is amazing is that an insistent, persistent voice continues to resound, ferment, encourage, and unsettle in the deserts of humanity and of earth: Prepare the way.

Unexpected ways are germinating, as they are eagerly desired, invoked, and enacted. A transformation, a new beginning, sprouts from the hidden below: from the margins, from the pain, and by the power of imagination, dialogue, faith, and hope. Abraham goes out of his land toward a promised fecundity. Rosa Parks decides not to give up her bus seat to a white person, initiating a new era in civil rights. The Buddha leaves his rich palace, setting out on a journey of liberation. John the Baptist renounces the status quo in favor of a journey to the sources of wilderness. Jesus disarms by great love the powers of death. Nelson Mandela as a servant of justice dismantles the system of apartheid.

How are we preparing the coming of compassion, justice, and peace in the daily gestures, choices, and relationships of our lives?

We have been baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire. *Fire* is the passionate love song, sung at the heart of our Earth, of our consciousness. Paul the apostle voices the effects of this fire: togetherness,
welcoming one another, our mutual belonging in the living body of the Earth and of the Universe.

Let us tune to the love song of the coming Christ at the heart of our time,
let us reclaim the world in all its richness and intensity.
Let us hope in ever new beginnings, as Gregory of Nyssa\(^1\) boldly claims:
Hope always draws the soul from the beauty which is seen to what is beyond,
always kindles the desire for the hidden through what is constantly perceived,
without cessation or satiety of the desire.

**Note**

Today a great light has come upon the earth.

What a boldness, a nerve, an unbridled imagination is witnessed by John’s prologue, joining the creative energy of God’s word, through whom the Universe continues to unfurl, to the human and messy embodiment of Jesus Christ, manifestation of God’s glory, imprint of God’s being. What has this divine, dazzling light to do with our daily, troubled, and sometimes unbearable life? Today, when we still are in the wreckage of financial, ecological, and communicative crises, this light shines on the contradictions of our personal and communal joy and pain, hope and despair.

We pause for a moment on the light, on the tent, and on the heart.

The light. The Universe unfolded from a hot point, a common cosmic source, an initial free and creative event, particles of matter and light expanding in an endless adventure. We have been suffused with and accompanied by light since the beginning of time through a very long, winding, and risky journey. The light becoming Sun has been the wellspring of the atmosphere of our planet, and of all living beings. And then the light of consciousness emerged, the light radiating in our languages, cultures, gestures, rituals, arts, and technologies. At a certain moment of this cosmic and unfinished story, this infinite light has built its receptive body, converges and shines in that point of conjunction of light and love, of human and divine that is a historical being: Jesus, a vulnerable, contestable, and disposable body. At once it is given to us to contemplate the mighty force that is birth-
ing the Cosmos and shines in the defenseless and tender flesh of a baby. A body that will be ruthlessly torn apart on the cross and will release the Spirit beyond boundaries and limitations in all directions. The divine light creatively embraces tensions, paradoxes, and contradictions, the glories and humiliations of the flesh.

**The tent.** The all-nourishing and still-in-the-making Word pitches his tent among us. From the beginning, a nomadic, experimental God provokes an uncontainable swirling of particles, galaxies, and planets, spirals of DNA, bursts of thoughts and emotions, swarms of cultures, and hurricanes of technological, digital networks. The Word, emerging as Atman, *Ruah*, Law, Enlightenment, and Sophia, is always tabernacling with God’s creation, with God’s people, with the ever-changing human perceptions of God’s inexhaustible names and shapes.¹ She is opening our senses to ever-new dimensions of consciousness and breaking the walls that are blocking the uncontainable expansion of the infinite Light. We contemplate Jesus as a precarious tent, as a host and a guest without possession, as an exposed and begging word, without religious and institutional security, and identified with those who camp on the edges, follow the star, believe in transformation, yearn for justice and hope, and are patiently open to love’s promise.

**The heart.** This holy day has the potential to reconnect us with what matters most: the holiness of our heart, the heart of holiness beating at the heart of each one of us, and of all creatures, and of the Cosmos. This heart’s light shines and asks to be received, to become embracing love, but we can decide differently: we can raise walls of separation around Jerusalem, around our hearts, countries, and communities, becoming impervious to her brilliance and transforming compassion. What path will we choose to follow? A path according to the encompassing, enlightening Word, a path of justice and peace, or the one of extinction and violence?

> Today a great light has come upon the earth  
> yet not so striking, not so blinding to force us  
> but hidden in the folds of a baby,  
> mixed in daily gestures of healing, attention, and compassion.  
> Exposed to the winds of our freedom,
she is easily killed by violence and deceit,
yet always rising
in faith, hope, and love.

Note

Baptism of the Lord

Isa 42:1-4, 6-7; Acts 10:34-38; Matt 3:13-17

*The heavens were opened to him
and he saw the Spirit of God alighting on him.*

Let us open the heavens of our imagination. Imagine the feeling of immensity sensed by the astronomer Edwin Hubble when, using the Hooker telescope on Mount Wilson, he discovered a multitude of creative galaxies existing beyond our Milky Way galaxy, thought to be the only existing one. Even more astonishing, he discovered that our Universe is endlessly expanding in all directions, turning our image of a settled Cosmos upside down. The heavens are not fixed but ceaselessly opening, widening, and transforming. The heavens embed us into a creative, mysterious, and evolutionary Cosmos.

Imagine how the change of a political or spiritual guide often open the heavens for a large community in the world, igniting and liberating frozen possibilities, potentialities, hopes, and pressing needs. Imagine ourselves as children, when heavens after heavens of wonder and discovery were opened for us as we experienced the fragrance and the threat of our emerging realities: worlds of senses, tastes, feelings, words, and people. Imagine the heavens that open when the fire of prayer ignites in our hearts, and the eyes of contemplation are opened, and we perceive our life in a new perspective, from the side of God’s compassionate love.

We participate in the opening of heavens in many ways. The texture, the grain, the melody of reality is never closed and uniform; it rather resembles an overflowing of living waters in which we are immersed, and from which we emerge. There are many heavens, layers of life, quantum leaps, levels of matter and spirit, openings of consciousness that expand and unite us in a chorus of differences.
What is this invisible, elusive element that opens the heavens of the journey of the Universe, of our planet Earth, of our personal and communal experience? We are opened from within by an invisible, merciful Spirit that ascends in us and alights on us: a hidden and unbounded heart, yet manifested and embodied as processes of birthing, liberation, and healing that are revealed in the narratives of cultures, religions, and the story of the Universe.

*The heavens were opened*

*and a voice from the heavens said, this is my cherished epiphany of love.*

Within Christmastide we participated in a symphony of openings, of relationships between earth and heaven, human and divine: visions and visitations of angels, revelatory dreams, wombs of possibilities, guiding stars, a promising child. Today, in a meaningful gesture, Jesus plunges into the height and the abyss of our humanity and of creation. He passes through the constraining walls of our bodies, souls, and cultures, walls raised by fears and cemented by violence, injustice, and exclusions. He crosses the hardened places of our hearts, our brokenness, agony, and despairs. He traverses the extreme experience of abandonment: My God, why have you abandoned me?

He passes through a crucifixion, the magnified network of evil, and paradox thickens. As Richard Rohr notices, the more light, the more mystery and darkness; the more love, the more hatred. And yet the heavens of love were opened to him, a voice comes from the hidden heart. *A voice: my beloved* (Song 2:8). The same pleased voice that at the beginning of creation repeatedly exclaims, *It is good, it is very good* (Gen 1:1-31). Jesus incarnates the crumbling of walls that block the infinite light hidden within creation; he is transformed into the mystery of arising Love that nourishes meaning, hope, and faith, attracting us out of the tomb toward an unfurling fullness of love that supports everything—even death.

Birthed from above, moving through death into life, each one of us incarnates the Universe surging into existence anew, generated by the invisible element of love that we seek, the hidden heart that finds us because it loves us. In our time we plunge into a new, dramatic baptism of human evolution. An openness is needed to see: a new level of consciousness and care is required for this moment in which we are destroying our Earth.
Is it possible that the immense journey of the Universe and of the spirit blossoming in our human consciousness will lead to destruction? To destruction or to a loving purpose, according to the hidden heart of Life? We need, we invoke, we offer our bodies for the birth on Earth of the divine element, of a vision of wholeness, of an action of inclusion of all our planet Earth.

*The heavens were opened*  
*and a voice said, this is my cherished epiphany of love.*
The prophet Isaiah, the apostle Paul, and the Son of humanity, Jesus, speak of a light that shall break forth from the darkness of oppression, of the wisdom of the cross, and of a salt that can lose its taste. They each express awareness of constraints, bleakness, and tastelessness in the historical moment of their lives. We may also experience depletion of meaning in our personal life or, on a larger scale, in the exhaustion of planetary resources, in the disintegration of social bonds, and in the predominance of individual or corporative interests. In modern times even the name of God has lost its taste for many people, mainly because of our use or abuse of it as a defense and cover of interests, structures, or old wineskins. And yet the good news that resounds today is that we can become the salt, the yeast, and the taste-givers of the Earth. How can it happen?

Let us listen to a poetic meditation by Mary Oliver, “First Happenings”:¹

A morning-glory morning with its usual glory, dawn particularly startling with citrons and mauves, petunias in the garden flashing their tender signals of gratitude. The sunflowers creak in their glass-colored dresses. Cosmos, the four o’clocks, the sweet alyssum nod to the roses who so very politely nod back.

And now it is time to go to work. At my desk I look out over the fluttering petals, little fires. Each one fresh and almost but not quite replicable.
Consider wearing such a satisfying body!
Consider being, with your entire self, such
a quiet prayer!

Just an ordinary sliver of time, an attentive look at the garden, a
listening heart, and—suddenly—an explosion of tasty joy radiates
in naming and feeling the multicolored flowers, as if each one of them
has a soul, is an epiphany, an embodied prayer. With careful atten-
tion, the poet makes herself a hospitable vessel where the creatures
reveal their inner vibrations, their surplus of splendor: their flavor.
We pay new attention to the hidden work of flowers themselves. We
have in fact discovered how they found an amazing way to season
the world, how they became catalyst of beauty and life in our planet.
With creative intelligence and many attempts, they were able to trans-
form light into an extraordinary symphony of life through the process
of photosynthesis.

The Sun has always enlightened our planet, but there was no re-
cipient, no organ able to receive the solar energy and convert it into
the food we eat, the oxygen we breathe, and the beauty of trees and
flowers that surround us. The Earth and the Universe found through
photosynthesis a way to express themselves more magnificently, and
to flavor the body of the world. The same was done by the first multi-
cellular beings, awakening the wonder of life on Earth. At a certain
point in the evolutionary journey something happened: an uncontrol-
lable energy overflowed in a particular species, a new fever in the
human that boiled over into the world as symbolic consciousness,2
words, mental forms, imagination, creative gestures, dance, and
rituals. Humans began to flavor Earth with arts and crafts, knowledge
and wisdom, cooperation and cults, science and technologies.

Between all these flavors that creatively made the world tasty, the
Universe was able to express Jesus as a manifestation of God’s
gratuitous and rising compassion. Jesus is a tremendous storyteller;
his parables season the soil of our lives and awaken us to the radical
sense of grace that touches and flavors each being. Each of us remem-
bers the parables of the birds in the sky and the lilies of the field,
reminding us that we can know everything, have everything, control
everything; but if there is no deep trust in the inner wellspring of
love, we create a cold desert, deprived of meaning, beauty, and creative passion. Similar to the process of photosynthesis, Jesus is able to transform even death, illness, and violence into a poem of life and of love.

In every Eucharist we renew the seasoning of the world: bread and wine, fruits of the Earth and of human participation become the body and blood of God shared with all, All-nourishing source of compassion for all and each one of us. What are the sources of taste, of meaning, of passion in each one of us? Are we able to pay attention and to name—as does Mary Oliver—all the living creatures that at every moment surround and season us? Are we willing—as Jesus did—to share with others the gifts we embody in this unique adventure of our life?

That we may wear like the lilies of the field such a satisfying body! That we may become, with our entire selves, a quiet prayer!

Notes

First Sunday of Lent

Gen 2:7-9; 3:1-7; Rom 5:12-19; Matt 4:1-11

We are grateful that we have not only natural seasons that give rhythm to the year but also symbolic, ritual, liturgical seasons that nourish and enlighten our pilgrimage of faith on Earth, connecting us with the creative God of the past, of the present, and of the future. With Ash Wednesday as an initiatory gateway we have entered into the forty-day season of Lent, stretching toward the paschal mystery of passion, death, and resurrection of Christ, and to the exceeding gift of his Spirit at Pentecost.

As we know from history, the liturgical season of Lent was formed as a journey of those repenting for having fallen away from love, and a journey of catechumens—those who desire to be initiated to the Christian life through the immersion into the deep waters of love of the Easter Vigil, the rebirth into the resurrected Christ. The liturgical atmosphere that accompanies us in our Lenten exodus is marked by invitations and practices for our daily lives that aim toward conversion, empathic listening, transformation, reconciliation, restored relationships, and the abundant gift of life that God intends for all.

Today’s narratives from the First and Second Testaments present dramatic scenarios of how our ways of life impact all forms of life and of creation. The primordial scene in the garden of Genesis and the temptations of Jesus in the desert tell us about the corrosive power of suspicion that creeps into our minds or hearts, which the Bible literally calls demonic, splitting or divisive because it insinuates the doubt that we are not really safe in God, that God is unreliable. What kind of image is the demonic power acting in our ethical, political, economic, and spiritual assumptions that we project onto God? Satan suggests to our personal and collective experience that the
all-nourishing and supporting Mystery is hiding something from us. The Ground of all beings is protecting a source of power that he doesn’t want to share with us and that we need to conquer in order to live, to be autonomous, immortal.

We are persuaded to be afraid of God as a threatening, competitive, and despotic presence. The radical temptation seems to consist in a rejection, in a denial of our mortality, contingency, and vulnerability, making sure that we are the controlling and measuring source of our existence and of the world. The devil in the garden or in the desert of our time continues to unfold inexhaustible arsenals of appealing needs and desires, all of them suggesting that we miss something that we have to conquer for the sake of our safety, be it the fruits of the tree, food, defense, dominion, or prestige.

Although we do not intend harm, this spiral of self-assurance may become an uncreating rhythm: through myriad forms of human power and ecological degradation we are disrupting a fundamental quality of God’s garden—its life-generating capacity, producing increasing economic violence on many people and on the planet Earth. Even most sacred dimensions of human experience can be exploited by this demonic logic. Religions and religious laws have repeatedly used the name of God as a weapon to smash the lives of people, to exclude them from the community, or to control behavior through fear and authority.

The good news or, as Paul says, the abundance of God’s grace is that in Jesus God manifests God’s totally gratuitous self-bestowing love, God’s love for the finite, unfinished, groaning, suffering world. In Jesus the radical temptation to reject our vulnerability and be immortal and almighty like God is turned upside down by the radical incarnation of the divine love. Jesus, God’s manifestation, becomes the flesh we reject. The flesh assumed in Jesus enters in solidarity with the very texture of our biological existence, with all material Universe, and with all the damaged, violated, wounded bodies of creation. The contingent, unfinished, and groaning world becomes a part of God’s own divine story, including the suffering death of the beloved Son of humanity. Christ tastes in his death what it means to suffer and agonize for love of the world. In his passion, God knows the pain and death of the mortal flesh, and through faith God opens us to the creative power of God’s divine love in the resurrection of Jesus’ disfigured body.1
Today, for the first time in human history, the future of life in our planet lies in our hands. This First Sunday of Lent reminds us not to trust in the seduction of fear, power, control, hostility, and consumption, but rather embrace the ineffable God who gives life, freedom, friendship, hope, and communion among all creatures.

How do we feel about our relationship with the Ultimate Reality of God: Is it inspired by trust and surrender or by threat and fear? How do we relate with other people, creatures, earthly reality—as partner or prey, as friend or enemy?

All-generative and gratuitous Womb
we enjoy the freedom we have been given,
and the compassion that shined in Jesus.
We desire to become love in human form,
to take on responsibility and care
for the planet Earth
and for all her blossoming beings.

Note

1. I invite the reader to expand the meaning of deep incarnation by plunging into the pages that have inspired this meditation: Elizabeth A. Johnson, Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love (London: Continuum, 2014), 192–206.