

Out of darkness: Images that reach us

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [August 26, 2008](#) issue

An astronomer friend of my husband's introduced him to the WorldWide Telescope a few months ago, and we've been staring into the heavens ever since. "Which planet would you like to see first?" my husband asked me once he had loaded the program onto his computer. No question: Saturn. I've always been fascinated by those rings. A few clicks of the mouse and there they were, circling and circling, a sash of light, a halo, a crown. We looked at Jupiter next, with its great red spot, a storm that has been swirling for centuries. We looked at Mercury, Venus, Mars, Pluto—but we kept coming back to Saturn.

Each planet was unique, different from every other. But what they had in common was this: they shone out of utter darkness. With each turn of the telescope, a new planet came into view on our computer screen, surrounded by darkness so deep and complete that the light reflected by the planet couldn't penetrate it.

A few weeks later, I visited the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston to see an exhibit on Spanish art. The galleries were full of El Greco's flamelike figures, stretching to the edges of their canvases. We looked at devotional paintings and statues, portraits of preachers and artists and royalty, still lifes of pears and cabbages. But what was most striking to me was the deep darkness that provided the background to so many of these paintings, a darkness that revealed no distant landscape, gave no hints about history or geography, and seemed as deep and quiet as the darkness surrounding Saturn.

The darkness was most arresting in the centerpiece of the exhibit, El Greco's unfinished painting of St. James, the patron saint of Spain. The *St. James* was part of an *Apostolado*, a series of 13 paintings—on 13 individual canvases—of Jesus and the 12 disciples. El Greco was the first Spanish artist to produce an *Apostolado*, and the *St. James* of the MFA exhibit was part of the last *Apostolado* he worked on before his death.

El Greco's *St. James* shines out of the utter darkness of the background like a planet being born. The unfinished left side of his body seeming to shimmer into being

before our eyes. A green cloak drapes his more nearly finished right side, and his right hand reaches out from underneath it, palm up, the long fingers slightly cupped in a gesture of invitation. St. James's long face tilts slightly. His eyes, large and thoughtful, gaze off toward the right. In his left hand, so unfinished that it seems to be in motion, he grips a short staff, appropriate for the saint whose name adorns one of the most famous pilgrimage routes in the world. A light from somewhere illuminates his cloak, his hand, his face. But all around him there is a deep darkness that gives nothing away.

Without a geographical context to distract us or a narrative context in whose stories we might get caught up, a painting with a dark background focuses our attention on the thing itself: the hand reaching out in invitation, the eyes looking deeply toward something or someone we cannot see. Maybe the darkness in the background is intended to cultivate not only the devotion of the viewer but the devotion of the artist as well. Maybe the artistic challenge of letting one's subject speak without reference to landscape or history is a spiritual challenge, one that requires the intensely focused gaze of love.

Or maybe the darkness *is* the landscape. Maybe El Greco's decision to place St. James in a darkness that calls to mind the night sky and the universe itself was less a way of obscuring geography and history than of compressing it into something crossable. Maybe it is from a landscape of all history, all geography that St. James reaches us with his attentive gaze, his outstretched hand.

When American astronaut Edgar Mitchell first saw Earth from the vantage point of space, he described it as "a small pearl in a thick sea of black mystery." To the Soviet cosmonaut Aleksei Leonov, Earth looked "so touchingly alone." The space between the planets is vast and lonely, the distances between them more than my mind can comprehend. As amazing as it is to be able to look at the planets on my computer screen, the grandeur and terror of those distances can't be erased.

But across that landscape of distance and silence, images do reach us. Earth, fragile and blue. Saturn and its circling rings. St. James reaching out across the boundaries of time and place with his long, slender fingers.

Maybe what El Greco knew is that no distance is so vast, no silence so deep, no darkness so complete, that God cannot reach us. Across history, across time and even across space, God "speaks and summons the earth," as the psalmist writes, "from the rising of the sun to its setting." Reaching out from a great distance, St.

James invites us to listen as that summons rolls across the vast, dark landscape of the universe and gets passed, here on Earth, from hand to hand.