Colors in the Night Sky: The Aurora
by Jessica Fries-Gaither

Have you heard of the Arctic? What about Antarctica? They are places near the top and bottom of the world.

Winter is very dark there. The sun does not rise very high in the sky. And in some places, it does not rise at all! Days are short, and nights are long.

Sometimes, you can see beautiful colors in the night sky. Red, pink, green, and white seem to dance across the dark sky.

These colorful lights are called the aurora. You might have heard another name for them. The aurora is called the northern lights in the Arctic. In Antarctica, it is called the southern lights.

Why do we see these beautiful colors?

Long ago, people told stories about the colors they saw. They tried to explain why the colors were there. Some people were afraid of the colors. They thought that something terrible would happen. Other people thought the colors were a path to heaven.

Today, scientists study the Earth and the Sun. They want to learn about the aurora and why it happens.
They know that the Earth is like a giant magnet. It has a north pole and a south pole, just like a bar magnet! Since Earth is like a magnet, it also has a magnetic field.

Scientists also know that the sun is very hot. It is so hot that that tiny particles fly off its surface. This is called the solar wind.

The solar wind travels through space to Earth. When it hits Earth’s magnetic field, it creates colorful patterns of light.

Scientists have learned a lot about the aurora. But they still have many questions.

Maybe someday you will travel to the Arctic or Antarctica. You might see the beautiful colors in the night sky. Or maybe you will study the aurora yourself!

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Glossary

aurora - colorful patterns of light that can been seen in the night sky
solar wind - tiny particles given off by the sun