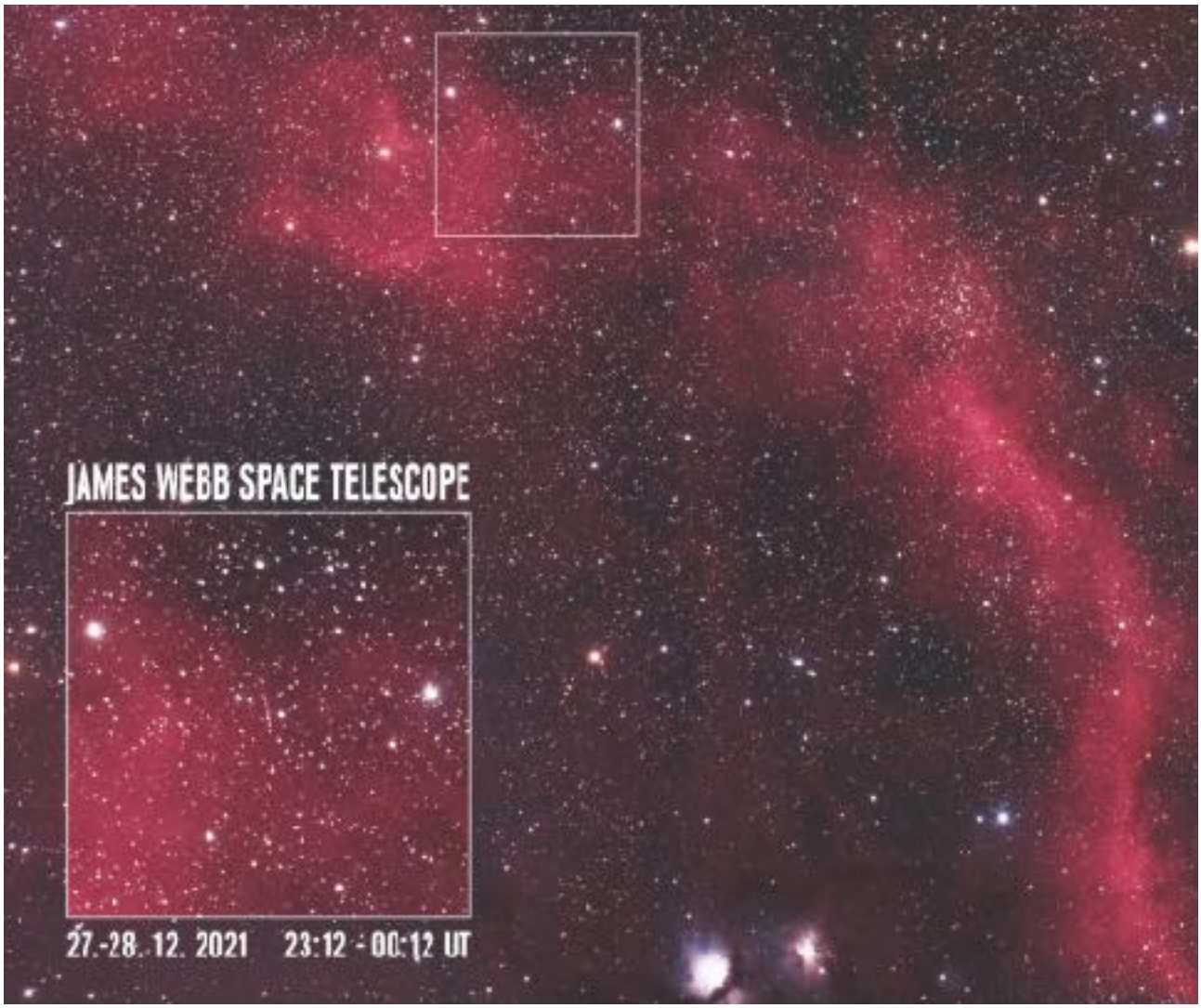
AMATEUR PHOTOS OF THE JAMES WEBB SPACE TELESCOPE: NASA's next great space telescope, the James Webb (JWST), is now hurtling toward the L2 Lagrange point where it will park to explore the cosmos. On Dec. 27th, amateur astronomer Zdenek Bardon caught the JWST en route, gliding through Barnard's Loop in the constellation Orion:



Bardon photographed the distant spacecraft (~350,000 miles away at the time of the exposure) using a 106mm refracting telescope in the Czech Republic. Stitching together a sequence of images, he created a movie of JWST transiting the red cloud of hydrogen ionized by newborn stars in the Orion Nebula. "I was assisted by two other amateur astronomers, Miroslav Grnja and Pavol Rapavy," notes Barton.

The launch of the JWST on Dec. 25th was a success, but mission planners are still holding their breaths. The 10 billion dollar telescope has to execute a complex sequence of deployments--unfolding pallets, sunshields, and the telescope's mirrors themselves--before the observatory can start work.

Meanwhile, amateur astronomers are tracking the telescope using coordinates provided by JPL Horizons (select the 'App' tab and enter 'JWST' as the target body). It is currently glowing like a 15th magnitude star. The brightness could increase, perhaps even abruptly, as the infrastructure of the observatory unfolds. Monitoring is encouraged.