

Advent One C - 11/29/09  
St. David's

Happy New Year! No, you are not Ebenezer Scrooge. You did not just wake up from a nightmare and miss the whole thing. As if this time of year did not make us crazy enough, causing us to constantly wonder whether we are coming or going, today takes that confusion to a new level. Today marks the beginning of the church year, even though it is the end of our calendar year. To make things even more weird, how did we just hear our church year begin? With multiple readings about the end. And how will this season of Advent end? With the story of our beginning.

If all that is not disorienting enough, today we enter the season of Advent, the time when I am to encourage you to chill out and wait, while the world around us is traveling in circles at the speed of light. But wait, there's more. It is not just that we are dealing with more cheery end times texts while we are supposed to be celebrating beginnings, but it is that genre again, isn't it? The same genre we just covered two weeks ago, the same one we just got finished studying in our adult education class. Yes Virginia, to complete the disarray of the day, we are once again dealing with apocalyptic texts, that same just plain weird genre. Perfect. Here we are at the beginning talking about the end, in a season where we are instructed to wait for the beginning, while the world around us does not wait for anything, talking about texts that don't make any sense to us. It is enough to make you wish that you had just woken up in time for the Rose Parade, and missed the whole thing.

But as the angel of God says, "Fear not!" The Spirit of God will be upon us. We

just need to tread our way through the apocalyptic hazards first. One way to avoid apocalyptic peril is the idea some of you suggested during our Book of Revelation class. Throw the bums out. Skip the apocalyptic readings all together, because they have done nothing in the last 160 years but create fruitcakes who led people to their own destruction, as well as entire denominations that have taken people down religious paths so far from Jesus it is difficult to call them Christian. You also correctly pointed out that apocalyptic is completely detached from the way we think in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. You noted that the people who wrote them and the people who originally listened to them did not think anything like us, and hence the terrible interpretations that have resulted.

All very true, and the same can certainly be said of today's Gospel. Perhaps the most important difference in this text compared to how we think today is the issue of science. In fact, the entire field of Astronomy did not exist when this Gospel was written. The hardest science of the day was, in fact, astrology. In a few weeks, we will hear that the wisest people known in that culture will use astrology to discover the baby Jesus. And that is what is going on in the first sentence of today's text. "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and stars." People in first century Palestine believed that there was a direct causal relationship between the cosmos and them. They believed that somehow their individual lives were directly affected by the movement of the moon and the roar of the sea.

Of course, we understand all that to be the primitive beliefs of an undeveloped

culture. We still have astrologists today, but for the most part we see astrologists not as scientists, but as crackpots. When someone today suggests that the position of the moon can affect our mood, then after we stop laughing, we suggest that they have a psychological examination.

From our much more nuanced understanding of how the world works, it is really difficult to hear today's Gospel and not immediately discount it as the fairy tales of an aboriginal people. If we truly believe, as I certainly do, that we need to utilize scientific method to inform our theology, then doesn't it make sense that we just walk away from today's Gospel because it is based in superstition?

But before we pass off today's Gospel as just too simplistic and too detached from us to be of any use, let us apply that scientific method to it that has served us so well in the post-modern world. Specifically, let us consider the relatively new science of quantum physics. In his book, *Quantum Theology*, Diarmuid O'Murchu summarizes the quantum understanding as follows; "It is the conviction that all life forces are interdependent and interrelated. In fact," he says, "we experience life, not in isolated entities, not in separate units, but in bundles of experience, that is quanta. Moreover, our human minds are tuned to receive life and the processing of our experience in wholes and not in isolated segments."

Rupert Sheldrake, a British biologist, relates to us this world of interrelation by using the example of the earth's gravitational field. We can't see it, but it is nonetheless real. It affects everything around us. The moon, in fact, moves around the

earth because of the curvature of the earth's gravitational field; the earth and all the planets move around the sun because of the curvature of the sun's field. These fields, or nonmaterial regions of **influence**, are what makes everything in the cosmos operate. Fields are also endowed with memory, suggesting not only that we are influenced by things beyond our senses, but that these influences continue occurring for years. An example of how this works is the immune system of the human body. Antibodies remember for decades what diseases look like so they can be attacked. That is why we believe that people over the age of 65 do not need an H1N1 flu shot now because they were theoretically exposed to the same flu virus in the 1940's. In the same way, we now realize that the entire earth is this same type of living organism, within which everything relates, within which, as the apostle Paul put it, "we live and move and have our being."

This understanding of how all things interconnect, without ever making physical contact, has now begun to influence all fields of learning. Another example is in psychology and sociology. Systems theory recognizes that all of us are parts of complex dynamic systems, in our family, social, work and church life. We now see that sometimes the best way to "cure" an individual is not to work with them, but to work on the social system around them. Awareness of how we are affected by our environment is the key.

What? We are influenced by the moon, the sun, the trees and the rest of our environment? Could it be, beloved, that we have been blinded by our own worldview?

Could it possibly be that those first century people were in tune with something we have lost in our industrialized, mechanized culture? Could it be that the author of the Gospel of Luke was more attune with how the cosmos operates than many of us are today? We continue to operate out of a worldview that emphasizes individualism and isolationism. In fact, I would suggest that even when something is obviously dependent on something else, we continue to persist in treating the two as independent entities. This may be most obvious in the numerous examples of people who continue to see no correlation between the alterations humanity has made to the earth and recent threats to humanity's well being. But both our biblical tradition and our most recent scientific data suggest nearly the opposite. Perhaps, just maybe, apocalyptic does have something to say to us. Perhaps our worldview could stand some adjustment. Not only can we learn something from today's Gospel, I would suggest that we must learn from it, or we are going to remain disconnected from the world, each other and God.

This disconnection is one of the most common faith crises that people present to me. It is so difficult within our individualistic worldview to be aware of God's presence in our lives because we are so unaware of our connection to anything. It's why the most frequently asked theological questions I get today are things like, "How can I have a relationship with a being I can't see or touch? How can I feel God?", or "How can you even be sure that God exists?"

For a first century Jew, such questions would have been non-sensical. Only in a post-Enlightenment worldview is it possible for someone to pose the question, "Is God

dead?”. From a pre-modern understanding, there was an obvious unseen presence in the universe that you knew was there by paying attention to the signs. It was only after the Enlightenment that people began to question the presence of something that was not tangible.

For me, this is the great lesson for us in the post-modern world on this first Sunday of Advent. We need to suspend our worldview and realize that in this area, the first century Christians had this all over us. They knew God was there. They knew it because they paid attention to the world around them. That, in fact, is Jesus’ point today. Be alert, or you are going to miss it. Pay attention not just to where you might expect to experience God, but pay attention to the bud on the fig tree. Be attentive, Jesus says, to the world around us. If we pay attention to the signs provided us in the natural world, we can find God, we can experience the Spirit of God upon us.

Perhaps the reason we don’t feel God’s presence in our lives is that we have lost our connection to the world around us. And we have lost that connection because our worldview tells us that we are an individual entity not affected by the world around us.

That is the central point of Advent for our world today. Advent is all about learning the art of awareness. Advent is all about paying attention. Advent is all about getting out of ourselves and becoming part of the world around us.

All of us have times in our lives when we feel desperately isolated and alone. Nearly all of us have questioned our faith as we searched vainly for a God that did not seem to exist. That is why we have the season of Advent. It is here to teach us what to

do when we can't find God. And lesson number one is all about connection. When we begin to realize and then accept that we are all connected to each other and to all of the cosmos in a literal way, a way we yet to fully understand, we will experience the Spirit of God, we will, in fact, understand the reality of Christmas.

I urge you all then, to spend this season of Advent reconnecting yourself with the world around you. Stop worrying about yourself and start paying attention to the leaves falling off the trees. Stop getting caught up in the frenzy of individual busyness and start listening closely to the winter sounds of the desert. Start hearing intently the voices of our neighbors as we participate together in Lessons and Carols. Feel the intensity and power of Virgil and Mary's music during this season. Walk the labyrinth on the winter solstice as we experience together the longest night of the year, the night before the world begins again.

Connecting ourselves to the cosmos and each other is just the first step though. Remember that when that first Christmas occurred 2000 years ago, the culture was very aware of their connection to the sun, the moon and the stars...but they still missed it. There was God in the midst of the world, the event the whole world had been waiting for, and only a couple of shepherds and those aforementioned astrologists knew anything about it. That's because no one was expecting God to come into our world as a defenseless baby born in the back of beyond to dirt poor Galilean peasants.

Here we are, 2000 years later, and despite all our scientific advances, we seem even less prepared to be aware of Christmas than they were. Here we are, unaware of

our connection to anything, much less to God. And how do we expect to experience Christ in our own lives? We are waiting for Christ to return in a cataclysmic fashion, on the clouds perhaps, as our Gospel describes it, with great power and glory. We are waiting for God to come to us as a lightning bolt. And when that does not happen, we begin to think that God does not exist.

If we are to experience Christmas 2009, we need to learn both of these Biblical lessons. We need to reconnect ourselves with the world, like our ancestors did. But we also need to realize why nearly all the population missed Christ the first time around. They were expecting something entirely different.

Yes, Christ is coming, but he is almost assuredly coming in a manner in which we least expect. We need to be ready to accept that Christ who will be so different than what we have imagined.

In previous years, I have reminded you to remember the counter-cultural aspects of Advent. In a world where everyone else is saying Christmas now, I have asked you to buck the trend and wait. Wait through the nothingness of Advent. Be patient.

Now I ask you to remember that all of this waiting has a purpose. We wait so that we may become aware of what is happening around us. We wait so that we will feel the connection and love we have with each other. We wait so that we will discover the presence of God right here, in our midst. Be alert and be silent, for sometimes God is but a whisper.

My prayer for all of us this Advent is that our sense of awareness will be

heightened to its peak, that each of us will become aware of new beginnings and new endings. It is through that awareness that each of us can be reconnected with Christ and come to the realization on Christmas morning, that yes, he is truly right here with us. Because, that, my friends is the real Christmas, the true birth of Emmanuel, the birth of God with us. Amen.