

ADVENT FOR AGNOSTICS AND OTHER ADVENTURERS

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Bloomington, IN

December 7, 2008

Nearly thirty years ago my preaching was somewhat determined by the Christian calendar, and I could always turn to the lectionary to choose a scriptural reference if I was at a loss for a place to begin. Having left that tradition in 1980, and returned to Unitarian Universalist ministry and thus to preaching 20 years later, I have found it both liberating and challenging to choose sermon topics, not from a prescribed tradition but rather by the dictates of my spirit so to speak. The question of whether that spirit is benevolent, malevolent or benign might be answered differently on any given Sunday depending on whom one asked.

I make no apologies for being an agnostic. It is not something for which a person can be sorry, it is simply a statement about the condition in which I find myself, i.e. a condition of “unknowing.” I occasionally have to explain my condition, albeit unsatisfactorily, to those who find themselves in the condition of “knowing.” I recently went to Marsh supermarket to have lunch at the deli. I go there when I want to eat in solitude and not get sucked into conversation, even pleasant conversation as usually happens in places like Nick’s or Bloomingfoods. Alas, on this occasion my desire to avoid conversation was subverted by the arrival of an old friend from my truck driving career. We both lost the best truck driving job in Indiana when RCA moved our Bloomington plant to Mexico in the beginning of the so-called free-trade exodus of most good manufacturing jobs in the United States.

I was just about finished with my self-imposed solitude and was ready to return to the office, so I reluctantly came out of my introverted self a bit for what I thought would be a minute or two of reminiscing about trips to El Paso or hours driving the yard dogs at the plant on South Rogers. Little did I know. After the expected few minutes of catching up and remembering, he asked, “Who you driving for now?” I should have said I was driving a dump truck and let it go at that, but I said, “I really don’t have time to drive truck right now; I am one of the ministers at the Unitarian Universalist Church here in Bloomington.”

Now he knew I had been a minister in years past, but I could tell that the denominational affiliation had him stumped a bit. I was really not in the mood to go into detail, but as I was turning to leave, he stopped me and asked, “So Bill, are you bringing a lot of souls to Jesus?” I should have said, “Hunreds of ‘em, every week!” But I didn’t. And thus began a 30-minute discussion about what it meant to be a Universalist, and how I have no idea what happens when you die and furthermore I really couldn’t care less, but I really am concerned about what happens when people fail to live, and that I believe with all my heart that we are called to live abundantly and love unconditionally in order to make this world a better place for all the children of life.

He, of course, was greatly concerned that I would go to hell to which I responded that if what he claimed to know to be true was actually true, then I would voluntarily go to hell to avoid the presence of a god who devised such a pathologically insane scheme and dared to call it Divine Love. “Well,” he said, “I don’t reckon I’m going to change your mind.” “No,” I said, “I don’t reckon you are, and I reckon it’s okay if we just disagree.”

We shook hands and parted company, and strangely enough, I went out into the parking lot and ran into another trucking partner with whom I stay in regular contact. He’s as country as a corn cob, and he asked what in the world me and what-his-name were in such deep discussion about inside the supermarket. I told him, and his wife said, “You know my mom was Baptist, but she didn’t believe in hell, and she thought it was all made up just to scare people.” People are just interesting when you start scratching the surface a little bit.

Now, I want to get around to Advent in a minute, but Advent implies waiting, and we don't want to get in a big hurry about it. First, I want to say very clearly that my being an agnostic in no way means that I am antagonistic to Christianity. On the contrary, of the most influential persons on my life and thought, the overwhelming majority of them have been Christians; men and women whose lives have formed the foundations of my very being, either directly or through their writings and witness.

I say this because I am afraid that we agnostics and other related unbelievers in the fundamentalist un-Christianity prevalent in America and belligerent in our politics, can at times be just as dogmatic as that which we oppose, and in so being, make our community uncomfortable to Christians with whom we have common purpose. As I was thankful to declare to the would-be evangelist-truck-driver trying to save my soul, this church includes practicing Muslims, Jews, Buddhist, Sufis, Hindus, Atheists, Agnostics, Pagans, and yes even Christians, and none of us claim the corner lot on the Truth. There is no corner lot on a circle.

We are all adventurers. And adventurers, by definition, do not know what lies ahead. The word "Advent" obviously comes from the same root as adventure, both of them coming from *venue*, "to come", and related to *via*, "the way." The way is an adventure. It is looking for what is to come.

Now we enter the Advent season, this being the first Sunday of Advent in the Christian calendar. (Note to the printed edition: December 7th was actually the Second Sunday of Advent. Agnostics not only do not know, sometimes they are just mistaken.) It is important that we not get ahead of ourselves. Sure we are all in a hurry for Christmas. How can we not be? As soon as we overcome the effects of tryptophan, or whatever those turkeys have that puts us to sleep, we are juiced to the max by lights, our mailboxes overstuffed with promotions, and everyone wants us to buy something. Advent suggests that something is coming, but it does not require our rushing to meet it. Rather it requires our awareness of where we are and prayerful consideration of how we will receive what is coming when it arrives.

The secret of Advent is in the mystery of what is to come rather than in the knowledge thereof. The power of Advent, "that which is to come," is in its ability to open our eyes to where we are. I want to share this morning the words of one of those aforementioned Christians that has influenced my thinking. I would rather not prejudice them with the name of the author or the date of the writing just yet.

"This is no longer a time of systematic ethical speculation, for such speculation implies time to reason, and the power to bring social and individual action under the concerted control of reasoned principles upon which most persons agree. There is no time to reason out, calmly and objectively, the moral implications of technical developments which are perhaps already superseded by the time one knows enough to reason about them.

"Action is not governed by moral reason but by political expediency and the demands of technology—translated into the simple abstract formulas of propaganda. These formulas have nothing to do with reasoned moral action, even though they may appeal to apparent moral values—they simply condition the mass of humanity to react in a desired way to certain stimuli.

"People do not agree in moral reasoning. They concur in the emotional use of slogans and political formulas. There is no persuasion but that of power, of quantity, of pressure, of fear, and desire. Such is our present condition—and it is critical.

"Bonhoeffer wrote, shortly before his death at the hands of the Nazis, that moral theorizing was outdated in such a time of crisis—a time of villains and saints and of Shakespearian characters. "The villain and the saint have little to do with systematic ethical studies. They emerge from the primeval depths and by their appearance they tear open the infernal or the divine abyss from which they come and enable us to see for a moment into mysteries of which they had never dreamed."

"And the particular evil of our time, Bonhoeffer continues, is to be sought not in the sins of the good, but in apparent virtues of the evil. A time of confirmed liars who tell the truth in the interest of what they themselves are—liars. A hive of murderers who love their children and are kind to their pets. A hive of cheats and gangsters who are loyal in a pact to do evil. Ours is a

time of evil which is so evil that it can do good without prejudice to its own iniquity—it is no longer threatened by goodness. In such a time the moral theorist proves himself a perfect fool by taking the “light” at its face value and ignoring the abyss of evil underneath it. For him, as long as evil takes a form that is theoretically “permitted,” it is good. He responds mentally to the abstract moral equation. His heart does not detect the ominous existential stink of moral death.” (Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* 1965 p.65f) (Note: I have taken the liberty of changing Merton’s use of the word “Man” and his use of the masculine pronoun to more inclusive language. If he objects, he can take it up with me when we meet over yonder.)

Those last words I find chilling to the bone. “As long as evil takes a form that is theoretically “permitted,” it is good.” Our nation has been dragged into a morass by theoretically permitted forms of evil, and the existential stench of moral death goes undetected, covered over by slogans about spreading democracy, liberating the oppressed and other gowns of righteousness. Advent is a season for waiting, a season of expectancy, but it is also a season of introspection, self-examination and repentance.

Merton continues:

“We live in crisis, and perhaps we find it interesting to do so. Yet we also feel guilty about it, as if we *ought not to be* in crisis. As if we were so wise, so able, so kind, so reasonable, that crisis ought at all times to be unthinkable...We think we know what we ought to be doing, and we see ourselves move, with the inexorable deliberation of a machine that has gone wrong, to do the opposite. A most absorbing phenomenon which we cannot stop watching, measuring, discussing, analyzing, and perhaps deploring! But it goes on. And as Christ said over Jerusalem, we do not know the things that are for peace.”

“We are living in the greatest revolution in history—a huge spontaneous upheaval of the entire human race: not the revolution planned and carried out by any particular part, race, or nation, but a deep elemental boiling over of all the inner contradictions that have ever been in humanity, a revelation of the chaotic forces inside everybody. This is not something we have chosen, nor is it something we are free to avoid.

“This revolution is a profound spiritual crisis of the whole world, manifested largely in desperation, cynicism, violence, conflict, self-contradiction, ambivalence, fear and hope, doubt and belief, creation and destructiveness, progress and regression, obsessive attachments to images, idols, slogans....We do not know if we are building a fabulously wonderful world or destroying all that we have ever had, all that we have ever achieved!

“All the inner force of humanity is boiling and bursting out, the good together with the evil, the good poisoned by evil and fighting it, the evil pretending to be good and revealing itself in the most dreadful crimes, justified and rationalized by the purest and most innocent intentions.” (*Ibid*)

Listen again, “...evil pretending to be good and revealing itself in the most dreadful crimes, justified and rationalized by the purest and most innocent intentions.” As I consider the voices of history that have shaped my moral consciousness, I do not believe that Bonhoeffer, Merton, Dorothy Day, Jesus himself, or any number of spiritual teachers gone before would hesitate to say to us that there is no moral distinction between the bombing of the World Trade Center and the carpet bombing of Baghdad or Fallujah, between the bombing of the market in Guernica and the bombing of wedding parties in Pakistan. The killing of innocents is terrorism whether done under the shadow of our flag or no flag at all. Merton continues:

“Man is ready to become a god, and instead he appears at times to be a zombie. And so we fear to recognize our *kairos* and accept it.”(*Ibid.*)

Kairos, as I have said before, is “pregnant time”, expectant time, as opposed to *Chronos* linear time. Merton recognizes our fear of what Tillich called the “courage to be” in *kairos*. These words of Merton are

difficult to read, to speak, and perhaps even more difficult to hear. But they are not the final words of Merton, nor are they the final word this morning.

While Merton goes on to describe the tyranny of our times as being more and more powerful in proportion to our ability to convince ourselves that we are resisting error and evil and are totally committed to the truth, he also points to another way of being. It is a way of being as old as humanity itself. It is found in, but not exclusive to, the teachings of Christianity, of Judaism, of Islam, of Buddhism, of the spiritual teachings of many faiths, and the basic teachings of humanism.

It is as old as the Hopi mythology that speaks of the time when the oldest community in North America was brought up from the underworld to the Black Mesa and instructed by their guide to go onto the surface of the earth and discover what it means to be a human being. I believe that being "Human" means discovering ourselves in the *other*, even in the enemy. Merton asks, who can better expose ourselves as we truly are? Who can best point out our error than the adversary that we seek to destroy?

"Love, love only," says Merton, "Love of our deluded fellow human being as he or she actually is...this alone can open the door to truth."

Merton believes that we have learned to hate our need of compassion, and we see it as weakness, and thus we have lost our capacity for mercy. We look for leaders, for Messiahs, for someone to take away our sins, and we look right past the very truth embodied before us in our brothers and sisters, in our enemies, and in ourselves.

Let me close with this story from the Hebrew tradition about a monastery. Some of you have heard it before, but in Advent there is sometimes adventure in old things heard again.

The story is told of a monastery that had existed through many years. For generations it was center of life for the people living in the region providing a place for family celebrations, religious ceremonies, and cultural festivities. People came from all around and the wines of the monastery vineyard, the bread from its bakery and the arts and crafts of those living there were highly valued. As the years went by things began to change and the festivals drew smaller crowds, families found other ways to celebrate their rites of passage, the community seemed to outgrow the monastery, and in time it dwindled in importance. Fewer and fewer monks came so that finally there remained only three elder monks who did said their prayers, held their daily rites and listened to the echoes of their voices bouncing off the walls of empty chapels.

One evening as they said the evening prayer and prepared to retire, one of the brothers asked, "What happened to us? We used to be the life of this valley. People from all over the region shared our lives, came to our festivals and brought their children to enjoy the beauty of life here." Neither of his brothers had an answer, but in their discussion one of them noted that there was a Hebrew mystic, a hermit living up on the mountain who had witnessed all that went on here for generations. "Perhaps he would have an answer to this question," said one of the brothers. They drew straws to see who would climb the mountain the next day to see if the hermit could give them an answer.

After the next day's morning prayer the brother who drew the shortest straw began the journey up the mountain. Upon reaching the summit, he found the hermit who asked how he could be of service. The brother said, "Master, you have sat up on this mountain for many generations. You have been witness to the life down below, and know that there was time when it flourished in our community. Everyone came to celebrate with us, everyone found meaning in our being there and shared the lives of their families with us, blessing us with their presence throughout the seasons of the year. Now there are only the three of us. Everyone has stopped coming. Our vineyards and fields are fallow, our ovens cold, and we go about our ritual in near solitude. We thought that you, having witnessed this, might be able to tell us what happened. Where did we go wrong? What can we do?"

"I have no idea," replied the hermit. "Indeed it is as you say, but I have no knowledge as to why it is so."

"Is there nothing you can offer us?" asked the brother.

“There is only this,” answered the hermit, “one of you may be the Messiah.”

The brother was shocked. “Really?” he asked.

“Yes,” said the hermit, “I have no doubt that one of you may be the Messiah.”

The brother made the long walk down the mountain in silence. He was met at the gates of the monastery, his brothers asking, “What did he say, what did he say?”

“He said he didn’t know what happened, but that one of us may be the Messiah.”

“No!”

“Yes, he said there was not doubt about it, one of us may be the Messiah.”

The brothers went silently to their rooms, said their evening prayers and laid down with troubled, yet astonished minds to sleep. They arose the next morning and emerged from their separate rooms to find that something had changed. In each of their hearts they held the mystery that one of them might well be the Messiah. Perhaps the first brother to come around the corner is the Messiah. Perhaps I am the Messiah!

This mystery so changed the way they greeted with one another, so changed the way they respected one another and the way they perceived themselves, each of them to possibly be, that life began to change in the monastery. As time went by, the atmosphere changed so dramatically that persons going by begin to notice. Before long, people began to stop by, life began to return and the monastery was transformed into a healing, wholesome community again.

What would your life be like if you carried in your heart the mystery that the next person you meet might be the Messiah for you? What would life be like in your family if in your heart you believed that each member of that family might well be a Messiah? How would that change the way in which you receive one another?

I have carried this story with me for years. I have shared it with men in prisons, in solitary confinement, on death rows. I have been amazed to see the light change in their eyes as they recognized that I affirmed their worth and dignity and accepted the possibility that each of them might well be my Messiah, and conversely, I theirs.

During this Advent season I look not for a Saviour, but rather I long for the Advent of Humanity, for the Advent of men and women who seek to be fully human. It is a time of waiting for that which is to come.

May our repentance be not to God but to the children of tomorrow, and may it come to pass that by our willingness to live abundantly and sacrificially we will redeem our human soul. May you be blessed.

Note: In seeking to find the source for the story of the Monastery told above, which I have carried for years, I found a version of it entitled, The Rabbi’s Gift included in Dr. M. Scott Peck’s book, The Different Drum. I cannot remember when or where I came across the story, but Peck’s accounting is very similar.