

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

Bringing the Mountain Home

Isaiah 55.12-13; Luke 1.39-55

Russ Dean, December 24, 2006



Some months ago a forward came through the internet circles, a “must see” the subject line said. Usually I resist the urgent appeal, click the “x,” and move on to the next in the infinite string of messages. But there was passion in this plea, and I could tell it had something to do with science or the like, so I wasted the next three fascinating minutes. As an exercise in Advent Seeing, let me recommend that you do the same. Open Florida State University’s “Science, Optics & You” web page¹ and a picture of the universe unfolds in the center of the page. The caption indicates that you are viewing earth (which is not visible) from ten million light years away from the Milky Way Galaxy. With successive mouse-clicks of the button provided, the view decreases by one order of magnitude. Ten million light years becomes one million and then 100,000, and so on. Each ten-time reduction brings you closer to the earth. It takes fourteen clicks for our tiny blue-green planet to come into view. In twenty-one clicks you are looking at a single water oak leaf on a tree that stands outside the National High Magnetic Field Laboratory in Tallahassee, Florida. The view to this point has become clearer with each new picture. “Finally, something I can recognize – trees, a leaf!” But as the view gets even smaller, in five more clicks you are staring at the nucleus of one cell within this leaf, and eight orders more and you’re looking at the nucleus of one single atom of carbon within that cell. When the display finally ends, 29 clicks, or more than a trillion, trillion, trillion times smaller than that first view, the visual representation of subatomic quarks (the

¹ <http://micro.magnet.fsu.edu/primer/java/scienceopticsu/powersof10/index.html>

smallest known portion of matter) can hardly be distinguished from the initial view of a universe of countless stars and infinite size.

We've been talking about perspective and seeing. Seeing the big picture. And seeing the details. The view from "the Forest." And the view from "the Trees." But, maybe, as this slide show of our incredible universe suggests, there's not really much difference. The view from 10 million light years "above us," and 100 attometers "below us," is indistinguishable. In other words, the very, very big and the very, very small look the same, to our eyes. This perspective serves to reinforce a crazy notion I've had for some time now that our so-called infinite universe in some quantum way really wraps around and folds back into itself – the infinitely large and the infinitely small, really being the same thing. It's a crazy idea,² I know, but it's just one more way of suggesting that what is really important... is the living that happens in the middle.

I think it's important to put things into perspective. To look at the universe, and our own lives, from a bigger perspective. It's amazing how this happens to people when they have experienced something that we regard as tragedy. In the midst of chaos and grief and hurt, they begin to look at things differently. When all I can see is loss and imagined-pain and resentment, they teach me the grace of the small things. God's presence where I cannot see it. "You know," they so often say, "it could be worse..." (And sometimes I think, "How could it be worse!?") "All things considered... my life isn't so bad after all!" An encompassing view gives us compassion. There is almost always someone else, if we're honest enough to see it, who has it worse than we – "there but the grace of God, go I." The big picture view is important.

² What I read and can understand about the new physics, I can't understand! It sounds more like metaphysics than physics, and I am all the more convinced that my crazy idea is not so crazy.

And it's also important to examine the details of life – even if it means comparing ourselves to the brainless slime mold to do so!³ How am I living? What did I do today? What insignificant event did I overlook? What conversation, what random act of kindness, what gesture of humility – or what moment of arrogance, deceit, or apathy – that may have, literally, changed the world?

The view from the Forest and the view from the Trees is important. We need to give some attention to both. But, when it comes right down to it [hold up bulletin]... this is not a tree.⁴ No matter what your view! This is a tree! [hold up sprig of spruce]⁵

Would you take a journey with me, this morning? Take the sprig of blue spruce you were given when you came in the door. Cup the sprig in your hands. Close your eyes. (Close your eyes!) Hold your hands up to you face and take a deep breath. Where are you? Keep your eyes closed. Where are you?⁶

...

I'd like to hear your stories. See where you've been in the last few moments. This morning as I took a sprig into my hands in my office, I was transported to Linville, NC.

³ Last week's sermon, "From Mold to Manger: Seeing the Signs of an Emerging God," used as its primary illustration lessons learned from slime mold (a rather unlikely candidate for the Advent Season!), as outlined in the book, *Emergence*, by Steven Johnson.

⁴ The front of our Advent bulletin featured a print of an oil on canvas painting entitled, "Blue Hill Has a Lots of Pine Trees," by a Chinese artist named Yuan Zuo. Each time the notation "[bulletin]" appears in this manuscript, I have re-displayed the cover of the bulletin to the congregation.

⁵ As each person entered the sanctuary, they were given the bulletin and one small sprig of evergreen, the trimmings from a blue spruce we purchased for the Christmas tree in our house. Each time the manuscript indicates "this is a tree," I have shown, again, a sprig that I took into the pulpit with me. The final meditation in today's bulletin was from David Wilcox's song, "Wildberry Pie": "When you pick a sprig of balsam pine / On your hike along the mountain view, / You can wrap the scent in corduroy, / And bring the mountain home with you..." (No one in the congregation needed to know today that Wilcox's song is hardly about today's topic. He's reflecting on a sexual encounter, high about the mountain – as he holds his sprig of balsam pine, he's not thinking of God! "...I'm lonely at work, now, my hand holds my chin, and my mischievous fingers remind me and cover my grin!...")

⁶ I was amazed at this exercise. We rarely ever do anything like this in a service, and I was expecting a timid response, but after giving maybe 60 seconds – a long period of congregational silence – I had to invite them to "Open your eyes!" because so many were still enjoying their journey!

Several years ago we took the boys out of school one early December Friday, before the frenzy of the season set in, and we drove to the mountains in search of the perfect Christmas tree. We got a little motel room, and then went out to explore the countryside. After dinner, we played board games until way past bedtime. The next morning we arose not-so-early for breakfast, a fresh snow had dusted the ground, and we drove to our selected tree farm. High on the hill, the snow there was six-inches thick, and as we looked for the tree with our name on it, a massive snow ball fight ensued. The smell of spruce was thick in the air [smell the spruce], as was the laughter of a family at play.

I could tell you much more about this trip. But you really had to be there to experience it. I could show you the pictures we took, give you a map, make some recommendations, and point you in the right direction... but until you have stood in the snow, trying to find the toboggan-covered head of a six-year old, darting in and out of the rows of trees, and avoid being flanked and flogged by an eight-year-old and his mother – all you would have is someone else’s story.

“Feah not... for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people” (Luke 2.10).⁷

I love that we tell the story each Christmas. I really do. I’ll go on record right now saying that if this congregation has the energy and the interest to run Tableau for another

⁷ In 1952 Park Road Baptist Church began performing a living nativity for the community. It was called “The Judean Hills: A Living Tableau” (from the French word for “picture”), and it has been conducted each year since then as a gift to the community. It is taken from the nativity story found in Luke’s gospel (there are no magi since they are found only in Matthew’s telling), and the voice of the angel, recorded by one of the church’s first secretary’s, Wilma Morrison, is in a decidedly southern accent, which I have sought to mimic here. I have referred to it, elsewhere, as “the best and the worst of what traditions can be.” PRBC is known for “Tableau,” and it is a non-negotiable component of this church’s ministry for many of our members. It has, however, become increasingly difficult to pull off, and we are probably bound for some difficult conversation as to the future of Tableau.

half-century, your pastors will support you. (“Tableau,” for anyone who may be visiting, is this church’s longest-standing tradition, a live nativity pageant that occupies a great deal of our attention during the month of December each year, but which is, understandably, becoming more difficult to pull off, given the hectic pace of an urban church. Oh, Amy and I won’t be out there flappin’ with you in 55 years, mind you, but you’ll have our spiritual support as long as you want to make this happen!) But, and this is not to throw a wet blanket on the Tableau fire – I hope this is already obvious to you by the kind of church we say we are – the true meaning of Christmas is not an event that happened in a sheep pasture in the Judean hills two millennia ago. As wonderful as the Bible story is – and we ought to keep telling it⁸ – you must be aware that the story is undoubtedly filled with legendary elements, editorial interpretations, and the sentimental embellishments that come to all good stories. It may well be “the greatest story ever told,” but the story as we tell it at Tableau, is hardly the message of Christmas.

Do you understand? [hold up bulletin] – for this is not a tree – no matter your view. This is a tree [hold up sprig of spruce]. Until you have experienced the coming of God into your own little world – until the God who was born in a stable in Bethlehem is born within the manger of your own heart – there is no Christmas. It’s just that simple. So, more important than singing angels and curious shepherds, is the message that you – and sometimes only you – can tell, of your own Christmas experience.

[sing] O holy Child of Bethlehem descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin and enter in; [congregation to sing with me] be born in us today.

That’s Christmas!

⁸ i.e., to our children, whether through the Tableau or the simple reading of the story in Sunday School classes, in church, and in our homes, etc...

“Someone once asked southern humorist Roy Blount if he believed in infant baptism. ‘Believe in it!’ he replied. ‘Shoot, I have even seen it!’”⁹

Christmas faith is planted in seed in the story we love to tell, but it only bears fruit – in me and in the world – when I dare to experience God, myself. The Forest is not just a visual reminder of God’s presence in our world, I truly believe the trees live a kind of experiential grace. In the words of the prophet of old, *The trees of the field... clap their hands...* (Isaiah 55). They know, if we can even use that word to speak of trees, the trees know the still-emerging God, and they sing God’s praise each moment they live.

In another of our great stories, no-doubt embellished like the rest, we hear that when Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth, the child within her *leaped for joy* (Luke 1). The gospel writer is telling us that being in the presence of Christ always stirs our hearts. The “child,” which is the true heart of each of us, cannot help but to jump for joy! “God-with-us”¹⁰ always has the same effect.

[Hold bulletin] This is not a tree!

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.
My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.
He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

⁹ Quoted in “Double Vision,” by Joanna M. Adams, a reflection on Luke 1.39-55 in “The Christian Century,” December 12, 2006, p.19.

¹⁰ Immanuel is the Hebrew name given to the anticipated messiah, whom Christians identified in Jesus of Nazareth (see Isaiah 7.14). Its English translation is, literally and woodenly, “With-us-God.”

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.¹¹

My Christmas prayer for this day is that as we travel this life together, “miles to go before we sleep,” we would each be granted, at least a few moments, to stop by woods on a snowy evening. To smell the pine. To see the snow. To feel the breeze. In other words, to really know God – in our own Christmas story. And, I pray that such experiences would give us the courage, as we face the rest of a year to bring a little of that mountain home with us.

May it be so!

PASTORAL PRAYER

HYMN OF RESPONSE

As a culmination to our Advent series, we sang this hymn, which I adapted from the original Christmas tune, “Good Christian Friends Rejoice!”

Good Christian friends, rejoice with heart and soul and voice;
Now give heed to what we say: Jesus Christ is born today;
Ox and ass before him bow, asleep within the manger now.
Christ is born today, Christ is born today!

Good Christian friends, rejoice with heart and soul and voice;
Trees and forest clap their hands, singing as an angel band
Cosmic view and each detail, still-emerging-God we hail
Christ was born that we may see, born that we may see!

Good Christian friends, rejoice with heart and soul and voice;
“Taste and see” that God is good, on plain and mountain, in the wood
When God stirs within our souls, we’ll know the story we’ve been told.
Christ is born in me, Christ is born in me!

¹¹ Robert Frost , “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.”