

A New Day
UUF

Rev. Walter LeFlore
December 11, 2011

During this time of advent, a time of waiting, let us stop to consider what many Christians the world over are awaiting, a new day, represented by the birth of Christ.

Psalm 96:11-12

11 Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it.

12 Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them; let all the trees of the forest sing for joy.

While the date these words were written is impossible to know for sure, the words themselves sound familiar in our today world. These are the words of the proclaimers, the rousers, the carnival barkers, the words of advertisements and perhaps the words of introduction to the newest and brightest politician. These are words of high praise and expectation.

How many new pieces of technology have been introduced with this kind of bravado? How many new products have promised to change the world or at least your life? Automobiles, refrigerators, the phone, personal computers, credit cards, I-Tunes and now the I-phone! Rush out and get one today, don't be the last on your block to own one! Elect so-and-so and all America's problems will be resolved by tomorrow!

Yes, these are words of proclaiming. Words proclaiming something, someone, of importance. These words of the Psalms, proclaim the coming of God to earth. This is not the first such proclamation. Almost every culture of every time has one or more gods that get rave reviews, have extraordinary power and should be praised and honored.

The one referenced here, is the god of our culture and time; The coming of Jesus, the Christ. One has to admit, He's played a central role in our world-view ever since. Let us sing for joy. Joy to the World, the Lord has come. Whether the God/Jesus of the trinity or a god of myth or merely a mortal, model human being, we can and should be glad.

Whether a God of miracles or a carpenter with compassion, we should be grateful for the images, moral character, and examples of compassion we glean from the stories associated with Jesus. Whether we say Hosanna, kneel and cross ourselves before this God, or treat the stories as myth and moral guidance, we should be grateful for this man/God, Jesus.

Is there anyone who's had a similar impact on our cultural and personal worldview? Superman or Batman can't compete. George Washington, Lincoln, Ronald Reagan, even Freud, all fall short. Some might argue with substance that the Buddha or Muhammad has in fact had the same or similar impact, and one would have to grant such an argument it's due, if we were talking world-wide impact. But today, we're talking about a powerful impact on our domestic, American, culture and worldview; an impact on us as individuals.

We say, "In God we trust". It's on our money. We commonly hear, God Bless America, in song and as the closing refrain of almost any political speech. Jesus Christ's name, is heard almost daily, as a way of expressing run-of-the-mill frustration. This man/God, Jesus, does indeed play a significant role in our everyday lives, even if we are not believers.

Even those who are Biblically illiterate, know of the story of the good Samaritan, although they probably wouldn't know its found at Luke, 10:25. The term "Good Samaritan" has become embedded in our lexicon. Almost all of us would recognize the term to mean someone who helps a stranger in need. Many recognize it as the name of a hospital or charity.

The parable, which is a story that speaks to moral character, is about a good Samaritan, an oxymoron in Jesus's time. Jews and Samaritans were competing tribes of Israel. In response to the question, "who is the neighbor that I am to love as myself?" Jesus tells a story to illustrate the meaning of the word neighbor.

A traveller, in route from Jerusalem to Jericho, was robbed, beaten and left for dead along the side of the road. First, a priest arrived at the spot and passed the injured man by, staying on the opposite side of the road. Then a Levite, another of the Israelite tribes, did the exact same thing, passed by on the opposite side of the road, not getting too close.

When the Samaritan came by, the story tells us, he had pity for the man lying injured or dead by the side of the road. He bandaged the man's wounds and put him on his own animal—presumably a donkey, took him to a nearby inn and took care of him. The next day he gave the innkeeper money and said take care of this man, and if it costs more than I've given you, I'll cover the costs when I return.

Jesus then turns to the questioner and asks which of the three is a neighbor? Answering his own question, Jesus says it is the one who showed the injured man mercy. Now, go and do likewise.

What a wonderful story. It's the kind of story we would tell our children in efforts to give them a moral compass, moral direction. Its the kind of story we would tell, even knowing, that if truth be told, we ourselves may well pass the man by, staying on the opposite side of the street, especially, if the man lying on the road appeared to be homeless or drunk.

Individual behavior aside, it is a wonderful story and even the Biblically challenged know the story because culturally, it speaks to the way we want to see ourselves, as a people. Its a story that speaks to the way most of us would *like* to see ourselves as individuals. It's a story that resonates with almost everyone.

There's another parable that seems to have taken root in our today world. Perhaps its not the story itself that's so familiar, but a single line about the camel going through the eye of a needle. The story of the Rich Young Man, at Matthew 19:16, tells of a young man who asks Jesus what good deed he needs to do in order to have eternal life? Jesus tells him to keep the commandments, including loving your neighbor as yourself. The fellow says he's done all that! What else?

Jesus tells him to go sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor and he will have treasure in heaven. The young man leaves with his head down, saddened and full of grief. He had an awful lot of stuff.

Jesus then turns to his disciples and says: "It will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God...many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.

Many of us with an awful lot of stuff don't tell the full story that surrounds the catch-phrase, camel through the eye of a needle. But even we have to admit it's a great image of a more popular phrase, no-way!

In a number of ways, Jesus warns of the rich becoming oppressors. He explains that many who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains (1Timothy 6:9-10).

These parables, and in fact, the life of the man/God Jesus, tells us that we have to pay attention to the poor. We come into this world with nothing and go out the very same

way. He tells us that despite appearances, we are all God's creatures. We all deserve to be treated with respect and dignity.

This was a very unusual message during Jesus's day. And I dare say, it is all too often an unusual message today. It was a message that was essentially heresy in his day. It is a message that is largely ignored in ours.

None the less, the Jesus message is one to be grateful for. It is a reason to say "Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it. Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them; let all the trees of the forest sing for joy."

Jesus's message represented a new day, a new way of living, a new way of being in the world, it was an entirely different worldview. And we should rejoice, for it is a message that we so need to hear, even today. It is a message we so need to take seriously and not treat as if it was only a good principle, a nice idea.

This day, here and now, let us commit ourselves to the message of this new day. Let us commit ourselves to better service. Better service to our neighbors, better service to those we love and care for, better service to all God's creatures. And better service to our own souls and well-being.

Let us wake every morning, knowing that today is a new day. Let us know that at any moment in time we can act as if it's a new day, with a new song and a new way of being in the world. May your new day, and mine, begin, here and now.

Amen