



The Second Sunday of Advent, 2020

The Great Mystery

***"It is in human nature to pray.
It is appropriate that we lay our words upon the earth. And so:
Great Mystery, you who dwell in the endless beyond,
you who spoke the first word and made of your breath
the mountains and the waters, the trees and the grass,
the man and the woman and the child, hear me in my small voice.
I am your thankful creature. My people and all the birds and animals
are your thankful creatures. Hold us!
Hold us in your hands and make us worthy of your blessing.
Tell us the old stories of your greatness,
that our minds and our hearts may be nourished
with wonder and delight. Let us see your likeness
in the stars, and let us hear your voice in the rolling thunder
and in the wind and rain. Be with us forever in the sacred smoke
of your being. These are my words, my offering to you,
Great Mystery."
Doctor N. Scott Momaday, Kiowa Elder, Writer and Teacher***

Temake.... Welcome Saints, Mona and I and our Worship Team this morning here at All Saints, Vancouver are so very glad that you have decided to spend some time with us in prayer today. We are blessed by your presence and we are grateful to have you in our Circle.

Today Saints, our Advent Journey continues and here we are already at the second Sunday in Advent, already now halfway in our observance of this time of "waiting." Last week, we visited some about a strong "symbol of Advent" that you see in our beautiful niche ... our manger. And such an appropriate symbol it is. The manger as a way of being fed, of gaining nourishment in body, mind and spirit

and of being together. Sharing of meal in communion and in community. The manger...humble, simple, yet profound.

Last week our Sacred Stories had one dominant and strong message, said in different ways by different characters but the same message none the less. Stay Awake! Someone is coming, something is going to happen, and happen soon. Be ready! Wait...anticipate. Yet, do so patiently as the Gospel of Mark said, "we do not know the day or the hour."

This week's message is dramatically different as we move closer and closer to our anticipated event. This week's message is "Prepare!" This week we are turning our waiting, our anticipation and our patience into action, we are no longer waiting, we are doing! And we have no finer example of preparing, doing, and making ready than John the Baptist.

First century Judaism, was fragmented like many religions of both then and now. Some subtle differences, some grand differences separated the four divisions of 1st Century Judaism into: the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Zealots and the Essenes. The Sadducees were the High Priests of the Temple, relying on the majesty and history of the Temple and the animal sacrifices and rituals that occurred in it. For Sadducees, holiness was achieved through ritual and sacrifice. The Pharisees were the teachers and relied on the Synagogue and the Torah. For the Pharisees, holiness was achieved through study and compliance with the many law and rules of the Torah. The Zealots were the warrior sect of Judaism. Much like the Christian Knights Templar that appeared later, Zealots saw the way to holiness through battle and the expulsion of the Roman infidel/occupiers from the Jewish lands. And finally, the Essenes, the communal, monastic-like mystics who saw the way to holiness through contemplation, prayer...through community, simplicity of living, peace and a ritual of spiritual cleansing called Baptism.

Many biblical scholars believe that John the Baptist began his personal spiritual journey with the Essenes. The Essenes, desert-dwelling mystics of Qumran, where later the Dead Sea Scrolls were uncovered. The Essenes who lived off the land, wore animal skins, were the pacifist antithesis of the Zealots and who believed in the "immortality of the Soul" some very Greek ideas that were far from the mainstream of any of the other three Jewish religious traditions.

From the Gospel of Mark today:

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’”

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

John the Baptist ...the Preparer our second example this Advent Season, and exactly like our first symbol, the Manger. John’s Essene-based message, humble, simple, communal. How will we be fed, mystically, spiritually, simply with the waters of Baptism, we start this journey to the Great Mystery.

Here is John the Baptist’s “Essene-based” message to 1st Century Jews and to us this very morning:

The Temple sacrifices and rituals of the Sadducees will not bring us to The Great Mystery. We cannot ritually kill our way there.

The Synagogue Learnings of the Torah will not bring us to the Great Mystery. We cannot learn our way there.

The Warrior Culture of the Zealots will not bring us to the Great Mystery. We cannot fight our way there.

But John the Baptist and his Essene community have us starting down the right path.

We cannot “know” God
We cannot “understand” God
We cannot “define” God
We cannot “describe” God

We can only **experience** God. God is, indeed, what N. Scott Momaday and our Indigenous Elders from the beginning of time have looked to “The Great Mystery.” Unknowable, beyond understanding, undefinable and indescribable.

This is what the Essenes, John the Baptist, Jesus Himself, and the countless mystics that have attempted to teach us through the centuries. Mystics like, St. Francis, Julian of Norwich, Bridget of Sweden, Hildegard von Bingen, Frank Fools Crow, Crazy Horse, George Fox and the Quakers, and so many more. The Great Mystery can be, should be and must be experienced.

This is what John the Baptist was preparing us for, “making the way straight for,” helping us be ready for by introducing us to the spiritual cleansing of Baptism. To be ready for the coming of the Great Mystery. The incredible and amazing “experience” of God, The Great Mystery in our lives through Jesus Christ. That very real, personal, unique, special and touching of the Great Mystery to us and us to The Great Mystery.

How and when? Peter says today, “God will come like a thief in the night.” Quiet, stealthily, silently. Where “our Heavens will be set ablaze.” And “we wait for new heavens and new earth, when righteousness is at home and we are found by God. And we are at peace.” We can experience the Great Mystery in so many and varied way Saints: in a Grandchild’s chocolate-covered smile; a spouse’s hand on our shoulder, in the grandness of a Cathedral Choir and in the Magpie’s caw. In the Sunrise and the Thunder. In a handheld in death. “Our heavens can be set ablaze” at any moment. In grand times and times of elegant simplicity. “Stay Awake” and “prepare to be amazed.”

And so Saints, like John, let us prepare our minds and hearts and spirits to experience The Great Mystery that awaits us, up close and personally. Peter gives us a couple of wonderful ways to “prepare” this morning, some Advent homework, if you will.

“When righteousness is at home, and we are at peace...we are found by God.”

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