

A sermon by Fr. Lane Davenport
16 December 2007

Advent III, Year A

Isaiah, 35:1-10

James, 5:7-10

Matthew, 11:2-11

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Christine Castillo Comer served as the Director of Science for the Texas Education Agency. In late October, she forwarded an email message to an online group. The email publicized a talk by a professor who has some prominence in debunking ‘intelligent design.’ Intelligent design is the latest theory favored by many who reject evolution and natural selection. Those who find evolution contrary to their reading of scripture often promote it. Forwarding this email appears to have cost Ms. Comer her job. It appears as if she was perceived as favoring the teaching of evolution over intelligent design in science class, and this was too much for her superiors to tolerate.

Frankly, it astonishes, embarrasses, saddens, even sickens me that it is even an issue whether intelligent design should be taught in a science class. It is not science. It explains the origin of species as the result of supernatural intervention. Science requires examining and measuring the natural world – not the supernatural. Science requires experimenting, observing, hypothesizing, testing, proving. Science confines itself to the material world; it doesn’t extend to the divine, the spiritual, the invisible.

The intelligent design madness, however, has been compounded by the press’s coverage of it. An editorial in *The New York Times* was almost as disappointing as the increasing influence of the intelligent design crowd. *The Times* referred to the “struggle between science and religion.” The clear implication is that there is a struggle, a conflict, between science and Christianity.

Science and Christianity are not in conflict. Science does not threaten to undermine the revealed truths of Christianity. Rather, science gives us a deeper appreciation of God’s creativity and his activity. Christianity teaches that material world tells us something about God and ourselves. We should explore it and learn from it. No doubt, at times the Church acts absurdly, fearfully, and takes offense at scientific findings. Truth doesn’t threaten the Church.

To the contrary, the Church has encouraged and promoted science – at least when it is being most true to itself. In the early 19th century, it was Anglican priests who got interested in rocks and started making geological discoveries that suggested that great age of the earth. It’s not

¹ ‘Evolution and Texas,’ *The New York Times*, December 4, 2007.

an accident that the scientific method emerged from a Christian culture that values the goodness of the material world and embraces learning from it and examining it.

At times the Church has over-reached. Most infamously, the Church got itself into a bind with Galileo and Copernicus when it tried to make facts fit its overly ambitious ideology, when it wasn't humble enough. The same is true now with intelligent design. Some Christians are trying to make the facts fit their preconceptions, their expectations, of the truth – hardly a weakness limited to Christians.

The press coverage of these differences between the scientific community and some Christians often makes Christianity look ridiculous. It implies that Christianity has no capacity for mystery, uncertainty, or doubt. Christianity does rest on some certainties, certainties like: God loves each of us; God forgives each of us; God wants to be with each of us; God sent his Son to live and die for each of us.

But Christianity also encourages us to appreciate mystery, to use doubt for our spiritual growth, to expand our tolerance of uncertainty. The good news is that we can be confused, that we can be unsure of what's happening now, and yet still have hope and even certainty that God is caring for us and preparing a blessed future for us. That's a central theme of today's gospel.

Last Sunday, we heard John the Baptist preparing the way of the Lord. John told Jesus, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" John thought that Jesus was the one he was preparing for, the coming one, the Messiah. Some time after John baptized Jesus, John became a political problem for King Herod, and Herod arrested John the Baptist. While he was in prison, John became uncertain whether Jesus was the coming one. He wondered whether he should be looking for someone else. He began to doubt Jesus.

There doesn't appear to have been much, if any, expectation among first century Jews for a Messiah like Jesus. While there was no single, unified idea of what the Messiah would be like, there was much expectation that the Messiah would be a significant military and political leader, someone who would establish a this-worldly kingdom, someone who would renew Israel and take vengeance on her enemies. Indeed, something like this seems to have been the expectation of Jesus' own disciples, like James and John, the sons of Zebedee.

With his expectations unfulfilled, John the Baptist was uncertain Jesus was establishing the longed for Kingdom. He sent people to ask Jesus, "What's going on? Are you the one who is to come?" Jesus' response was disappointing to them. He didn't provide the direct, straightforward, explicit answer they wanted. He didn't even fully answer the question. He gave them ambiguity.

Jesus said, "What do you hear and see happening? The blind see; the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed; the deaf hear; the dead are raised up; and the poor, those in need, have received good news." Few, if any, of Jesus' contemporaries expected the Messiah would be a healer. This isn't what they expected.

Jesus says, “Blessed are those who don’t stumble over me, those who take no offense at me.” In other words, “Blessed are those who don’t get disappointed because I haven’t fulfilled their expectations.” They’re blessed because they are still going to be able to make a decision for Jesus. Despite the unknowns, the uncertainty, the blessed are still able to commit themselves to Jesus and his mission. Jesus’ response to John is an invitation to John to make his own decision based upon what he has heard.

Advent is a season of waiting and expectation, a time of darkness and doubt. Christmas is a season of joy and fulfillment, of returning light, but if we’re honest, Christmas has at least tinges of disappointment. When Jesus comes to us, he’s not always everything we want him to be. It reminds us that faith doesn’t come from the fulfillment of expectation. Rather, faith grows when we have a capacity for mystery and uncertainty, and yet can still make a decision for Jesus and commit ourselves.

Sister Wendy Becket, the delightful and popular art critic, is also a keen observer of the interior life. She appreciates that doubt may lead to spiritual growth. She writes:

The holiest person I know has never had the slightest interior intimation that God exists. All she gets back from her prayer is doubt and darkness. She experiences a terrible fear that her life with God is all imagination; that there is no God; that living as a nun is a mockery. With this agonizing sense of her own personal weakness and her own absolute absence of felt certainty, she chooses. She chooses to believe. She chooses to act in accordance with that belief, which means in practice a life of heroic charity. This woman – and others like her, because she is not alone in her heroism – is giving to God the real sacrifice of faith. This woman chooses to love God and to serve Him and to believe in Him, even if she gets nothing back.

² Sister Wendy Becket, *Sister Wendy on Prayer*, Continuum (2006), pp. 83-84.

I think that this is the message Jesus is giving John in today's gospel. John is in prison - about to be killed, but waiting for vindication, expecting a different kind of salvation than Jesus gives. Jesus hasn't come to rescue John from prison or even to prevent him from being beheaded. John wants the Messiah to come and bring woe to his enemies. The surprise, and the good news, is that Jesus doesn't come bringing judgment, condemnation, and misery, but rather Jesus comes blessing people, blessing them in surprising ways - especially those who don't stumble over him.

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The Rev. Lane Davenport
Ascension and Saint Agnes

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² Sister Wendy Becket, *Sister Wendy on Prayer*, Continuum (2006), pp. 83-84.