



“Hope, In A Single Storey Universe”

But perhaps a less well-known feature of Advent hope is that it is also a time when traditionally the church has looked ahead – toward the return of Christ. That’s right, folks. Advent has always been associated as much with the return of Christ as the birth of Christ.

And that’s why, for all you biblical scholars out there who pay attention to such things, there are always apocalyptic readings associated with Advent. The early community placed their hope in the return of Jesus to come and finish what he started. In the traditional mindset this was always associated the shaking of the foundations – the earth would literally shake as earthquakes and signs in the heavens signaled the end of a world order, and anticipated the beginning of a new one. Advent is a season of hope in that we look back to what God has done as we celebrate the birth of Jesus, and as we look forward to God’s promise inherent in this

traditional belief about the return of Jesus to bring the old creation to a close and usher in a new ideal age.

But Houston, we have a problem. And the problem centers on our language. In the traditional language of Advent and Christmas, we say things (looking back) like “God came to earth in Jesus” and looking forward “Christ will come again”. We place our hope in a God who interrupts the natural affairs of human history and creation, beaming Himself in from some extra-cosmic residence to make things right.

It’s a picture of a universe that is like a two-storey house – like that old British sitcom *Upstairs/Downstairs*. God lives upstairs, and the rest of us servants live downstairs. And it’s a very rare and exceptional occurrence that upstairs residents ever make it downstairs. Every now and then, like the first Christmas 2000 years ago, God came down the stairs

– or maybe down the chimney (sorry, wrong story) – and visited us, leaving the gift of the baby Jesus. In the future, who knows when, God will visit us downstairs once again and tidy the mess we’ve made in the living room of lives here on earth. Do you see the problem?

This language problem is reflected in our Advent hymns – not to mention our Christmas carols.

“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,
and ransom captive Israel
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appears.

Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall
come to thee, O Israel.”

The lyrics of this magnificent carol imagine a time when the Son of God will “appear” – from out of nowhere. The song bases its hope in being rescued by the Son of God at some distant point in the future, and as long as you can muster up the conviction to believe this, you’re OK.

Verse 2 begins: “O come, O
Wisdom from on *high*” – from the second storey.

And verse 6: “O come, Thou
Dayspring, from on *high*”, and cheer us by
your drawing nigh.”

Or take the hymn we sung to open
the service, written in the mid-18th century
by Charles Wesley: (Voice United – #2,
Come Thou Long Expected Jesus).

“Come, thou long-expected Jesus”.
It’s an advent hymn that bases our hope as
God’s people in the return of Jesus from
some realm outside the known universe.

Now, let me state as clearly as
possible that there is nothing wrong with
these hymns. We’ll probably be singing
them for many years to come. They are a
part of our tradition that we want to carry
forward. But they should come with a
warning every time we sing them.
“WARNING” – this hymn was written
from within a traditional worldview before
science revealed that we live in a single
storey, evolving universe that does not
actually have an Upstairs and a
Downstairs.

You see, God is the House of
Mystery within which every thing and

every body lives and moves and has its evolutionary being and its becoming. It's an emergent universe, not a static one. God is the circumference, the center, the radius, above, below, and most importantly the *deep within* of all creation. Thomas Berry, the great cosmologist and geologist thought we should replace the word "transcendence" with "incidence".¹ To many people, transcendence implies a place beyond this realm. We look forward to going there after we die. Berry is inviting us to go deep *within* the forms and structures of this universe, this reality, there to discover a dimension of Sacred Mystery. There is another country of the soul, as it turns out, but it's *within* this one, not beyond it. Go deep within the interior reaches of human consciousness and you arrive at Sacred Mystery.

So, if we think in terms of incidence, Jesus emerged *out of* the earth, like you and me, through Mary – a living, conscious embodiment of the elements that came from stars, progeny of bacteria and fish and mammals and birds, in the lineage of David, through his father

Joseph, born of woman. If we want to keep the virgin birth as part of the story – and why not? – let's agree that it's a mythological creation of the early church to signal that this was no ordinary birth. Every once in a while a human being emerges from within the House of Mystery who is a radiant embodiment of entire 13.7 billion year evolving universe. In his presence and through his teachings we get a glimpse of God's dream for creation. So we tell this story, not as historical fact, but as spiritual truth – the two are neither opposed nor identical.

And if we want to talk about our hope for Jesus' return – and why not? – let's agree that it's not Jesus of Nazareth's return we're waiting for. We're waiting on the promise of a more glorious future that was anticipated in a person like Jesus, and also in others. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit priest and paleontologist, regarded the human species as the promise inherent in the evolutionary process up until now. All of creation converged to the point of the self-conscious creature capable, for the first time in history of taking responsibility for the future. But that convergence – that dynamic coalescing of 14 billion years in

¹ Thanks to my friend, Michael Dowd, who pointed me to this term, and to an article that uses the word "incidence".

the human species – doesn't end with the 21st century form of the human being. We're just a temporary expression of it.

Convergence is a principle intrinsic to this Spirit drenched cosmos. Just as the dream and possibility of the human form of creation pulled at creation from a time when only star fields existed, so the Future pulls at the human being today. It pulls at us as a promise from the future of greater fullness and freedom of being – a new humanity, a new creation wanting to be born through us. We are being drawn by the same convergent power that helped creation arrive at the self-conscious, future-determining creature we call the human being. Teilhard called this alluring power the Omega Point. It is speculative, of course, but it resonates with me.

Advent, in this evolutionary theology we're experimenting with at Canadian Memorial, becomes a season to allow ourselves to be allured by this Sacred Principle of Convergence – to enter into it's field of attraction and collectively imagine what is the next, emergent form of spiritual consciousness – beyond us. Beyond us, yes, but which can only *emerge*

through us! If you asked me to articulate, at this point in my journey, an evolutionary doctrine of the Second Coming of Christ, this would be it.

We're not hoping for a rescue mission by an extra-terrestrial being some time off in the future. We're taking a look *back* at the kind of revelation a person like Jesus of Nazareth represents for the universe, and saying that in him, born in a stable 2000 years, the Future revealed itself. And now, 2000 years later, a Promise of Plenitude still pulls at us. We talk, metaphorically, about the fulfillment of this promise as the "return" of Christ, but what we mean by this is that we anticipate a time when enough people become conscious and willing occasions of this sacred convergent dynamic that a new species will be born – a new birth of Christ consciousness. And my own feeling is that we're waiting on a collective awakening, not an individual Messiah. It begins right here at Canadian Memorial

with our own awakening to the future that is wanting to born through us.

We're hoping that our soul's desire for God's dream – the Kin(g)dom of God will so stir us that we'll know what it feels like to be Mary, and say to the beckoning dream of the Future "Let it be to me according to Your word". And listen, friends, we don't have the words yet for it. We don't have the hymns yet for it. Maybe it will take 50 years for the hymn to catch up.

But we have Jesus' image in today's reading. "Look at the fig tree – and all the trees – as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place you know that the Kingdom of God is near" (Luke

But we have Jesus' image in today's reading. "Look at the fig tree – and all the trees – as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place you know that the Kingdom of God is near" (Luke 21:29-31). And so we watch for sprouting leaves, signs of the advent of God in our midst – each one of *us* a sprouting leaf.

