

Sunday, January 5, 2014
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon

Happy New Year! On this first Sunday of the year it is always exciting to look ahead and imagine what the coming months might have in store for us.

There is a certain optimism that creeps into our consciousness as we accept the gift of a clean slate, a fresh start, a new beginning.

I like to start the new year with some vacation time to mark both an ending and a beginning.

While on vacation last week I enjoyed the luxury of having time to read.

On the first day after Christmas, when all of the guests were gone and the house had settled into a certain peacefulness, I read two essays that provided me with much fodder for reflection in the ensuing days.

The first article, by Akiko Busch, was entitled *Life on the Edge* which used the metaphor of the environment to explore what meaning lies in the dawn of a new year.

This is an excerpt that particularly resonated with me:

“In environmental parlance, the ecotone is the zone where two habitats merge, that threshold where water meets the shore, where the forest comes to meadow, or where woodland ends at a cultivated lawn.

It is the edge habitat where everything — soil content, vegetation, moisture, humidity, light, pollination — changes.

It’s also where species from both sides converge, rendering it a place of complex interaction and diversity.”

She ponders: “Perhaps it is possible to imagine year’s end as having some temporal edge effect, to see it as the place where desire and expectation intersect with actuality.

And to look at this time of year as an interval during which one is suddenly more attentive to that friction between the finished and the unfinished, the energy that lies between the done and the undone.”

I found myself paying careful attention throughout the week to the ‘ecotones’ of my own life and pondering the thin margin of what has happened and what is yet to happen.

My sons were both home for Christmas, with their girlfriends. They are young men now, no longer children. They are responsible for themselves, no longer dependent on Joe and me to tend to their needs.

The 'ecotone' between childhood and adulthood, between parent and friend was clear.

Although, this altered completely last evening when Andrew's connecting flight home was cancelled and he found himself stranded at Dulles Airport. The beauty of technology is that we were able to guide him home, via cab, bus and cab...a new kind of star in the night.

Our lives are made up of so many of these transitional moments.

As a mainline Christian Church in today's world, we too exist in a somewhat marginalized space.

We balance our rich tradition of worship and influence with a new-found reality that we are but a remnant of the larger culture.

The values that we seek to nurture in our worship and study are considered 'old fashioned' to some; outdated, or perhaps quaint.

On Christmas Eve, three-hundred and sixty people crowded into this Meetinghouse to celebrate the traditional service of Lessons and Carols.

This service was designed in 1880 for use in England and has been altered only slightly in the past 133 years.

It is a service that showcases the word of God, but does little to interpret the meaning of that word for our lives today.

Those gathered for lessons and carols are left to their own devices to discern the meaning of being a Christian in today's world.

I couldn't help but wonder if we are clear about why we are here and what it means to be 'church.'

The following Sunday, less than 50 people gathered for worship. What does that mean?

The scholars have labeled our current era as "Post-Christiandom," denoting the change in our culture from one centered on the Christian faith, to a more pluralistic society.

Again, the metaphor of the ecotone serves us well.

We are at the edge, between two worlds and we must discern for ourselves which path we choose to take.

The second essay I read on that quiet Thursday morning was Leon Wieseltier's treatise on the importance of the humanities in our culture. This article was written as a response to Steven Pinker's defense of science as the more powerful academic pursuit.

Wieseltier is the literary editor of The New Republic and felt compelled to make a case for the importance of the humanities in a civilized world.

He included a defense of religious thought and interpretation as deeper and more nuanced than the media often portrays.

He said:

“Interpretation is what ensues when a literal meaning conflicts with what is known to be true from other sources of knowledge.”

He points out that “most of the belief systems of all the world’s traditional religions and cultures have evolved in their factual understandings by means of intellectually responsible exegesis that takes the progress of science into account; and most of the belief systems of all the world’s traditional religions and cultures are not primarily traditions of fact but traditions of value; and the relationship of fact to value in those traditions is complicated enough to enable the values often to survive the facts.”

Traditions of value – that is my religion.

Wieseltier argues that “The scientizers do not respect the borders between the realms; they transgress the borders so as to absorb all the realms into a single realm, into their realm.”

Again, we find ourselves at a place of borders.

We have perhaps created impermeable lines at places where we should be flexible.

Andrew would have had a much more difficult time finding his way home last night if he had refused to ask his parents for help.

What of our wise men in today’s reading?

Are they not a perfect example of the beautiful blend of science and religion?

Did they not consult their knowledge of the sky and the stars to find their way to an unimaginable place of peace and beauty?

Our gospels contain two clear revelations that would have been startling for the first readers of Matthew’s Gospel.

The first is that the Messiah has come inclusively – for all people: Jew and Gentile, Wealthy and Poor, Oppressed and Oppressor.

The second revelation is the truth that is revealed in the Wise Men’s gifts:

This Child is Royalty as signified by the Gold;

This Child is Divinity evidenced by the gift of frankincense,

This Child is Servant shown in self-giving Sacrifice of myrrh.

In order to accept this, the wise men had to go far outside their borders of understanding.

They had to open their hearts, as well as their minds, to take in a message so radical that it simply made no sense.

There was no precedence for a King to be born in a stable – for a light to shine in the overwhelming darkness of oppression and occupation.

But the light did shine in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. Not then, not now.

One commentator asked: “What if this were the whole Christmas story? ‘The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.’”

What if, at Christmas, we didn't hear anything about babies, donkeys, or angels, but just this one sentence? *The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.*’

Would it be enough?

Maybe,” she says, “it's more than enough.

Maybe all we really need to hear is “The light shines in the darkness.” Or maybe just “The light shines.”

Or just, “Light.”

This is one way of praying with Scripture: letting the Holy Spirit take you deep into the story; so deep that the story disappears and just one word remains. Then you experience the presence of God in a single word.

This is a crossing of boundaries. This is stepping beyond your comfort zone and reaching deep within yourself to ask,

“What am I doing here and what does this mean?”

This is our work for the New Year.

We are Christians – followers of the Light.

It is up to us to learn what that means and to live our lives in such a way that the light shines through us into a dark, despairing world.

We must have the courage to see the ecotones of our own lives and to cross boundaries when God calls us to do so.

I want to close with a poem I came upon in my vacation readings:

About The Light

It's always been about the light with you,

hasn't it, Jesus?

Magi, braving distance and desert to find you,
and bewildered shepherds, compelled by an angel's invitation,
allowed light to be their guide,

And it is still the light that calls us to you;
the light of beauty that whispers its truth
in surprising ways and places;
the light of compassion that kneels,
and washes road-soiled, life-battered feet;
the light of joy that glows
even in the darkness of grief and suffering;
the light that seeks to shine within us,
and through us into the dark corners of our world.

It's always been about the light with you, Jesus;
and it's always about the light for us.

Please lead us, now and always, out of darkness
and into your marvelous light.

Amen.