

The One Who sits in the Heavens Laughs

Psalm 2:1-4 February 8, 2004

February 8: the ground-hog saw her shadow last Monday, and it's six more weeks of winter... well, just over 5 now. I think I can safely declare that the mid-winter blahs have set in. Record cold. Lots of snow. And plenty of muttering to support my case. Saw a colleague last week, who in the course of 90 minutes asked me three times, if she had said she hates winter. Ice dams formed on our roof at home, and damaged a ceiling which had already been fixed once. At 11 p.m., my valentine demanded I go out on the roof and do something about it. I gallantly refused. But I was out there, muttering myself at 8:00 the next morning. Having lunch with my Mendham clergy colleagues Tuesday, I heard a couple of the folks in the kitchen commiserating about the piles on their desks, and the distressing sense they were not making any progress. My UCC support group met later in the week: one was grieving a brother's death; another his mother's dementia; another a partner's illness; another his church's devotion to the status quo.

It's mid-winter blah time people! One might get used to it, if it didn't get worse! I picked up a newsletter I receive on the intersection between culture and religion. Looking at a list of the top religion stories of 2003, Martin Marty observed that "conflict rules." Conflict, despite the fact, Marty observes, "that most people participate in religious gatherings in order to find: salvation, company, transcendence, hope healing, peace, consolation and inspiration." But reading the news about religion paints a different picture. In a list compiled by the Religion News-writers Association Marty found roughly three stories of a "peaceful" sort: Pope John Paul's silver anniversary; an organization formed to promote Christian unity; and the fact that the Latter-day Saints had celebrated the 25th anniversary of appointing blacks to their priesthood.

As for the rest of the list, it's conflict all the way down. Here's a sample of what you might call the opposite of "gospel," the reverse of good news: Episcopalians fight over ordination of an openly gay bishop; American churches fight over attitudes toward the Iraq war; the Massachusetts court decision about gay marriage induces church fights; Justice Roy Moore provokes a fight over the Ten Commandments on public space in Alabama; Catholics fought over churchly responses to clerical abuse; fights in denominations over budget-forced cutbacks were common; religious people fought over "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance; Missouri Synod Lutherans fought about who gets to pray where and when and with whom.

The list continues: Southern Baptists fought about and then fired missionaries who would not sign on to their new creed; religious people fought about the Terri Schiavo "ending-of-life" issue in Florida; Muslim-Hindu violence and other "tribal" fights far away produced repercussions at home; Jews fought over surveys showing

fewer people following Jewish teaching; fights began early about Mel Gibson's forthcoming movie about Jesus; etc., etc., up to 25.

These are the sad results from religious movements where "people participate in order to find: hope healing, peace, consolation and inspiration." Something has gone wrong on the way to heavenly bliss and earthly delight.

Martin Marty wonders how in the world we will ever attract people to synagogues, mosques and churches with this kind of bad press. With a firm grasp of the obvious he observes that "Religious people and groups have to be busier and more visible about their positive business if they want the public to understand what they are about or think they are about. Most religion-in-the-news has to be a turn off in the eyes of seekers." Looking ahead, he asks, "Can we see the word 'fight' less often?"

It is mid-winter people, and things are not necessarily looking up. But don't despair about 2003. It's over, and besides religious folks have been fighting for a long, long time. I started a book recently on the history of theology in the US since the 1850's. Early on, voices of dissent and arguments were raised over slavery, abolition, reconstruction, poverty in the cities and the labor movement. Eighty years ago, Darwinism was rocking the boat. Heresy trials were common. John D. Rockefeller built Riverside Church for Harry Emerson Fosdick to save him from being defrocked by the Presbyterians. Seminary students were vilified and jailed for being conscientious objectors at the outset of World War II. Faculty members were black-listed in the 50's in the midst of the "red-scare." Bad news in 2003 wasn't unique! Don't worry about it! The status is quo!

Consider an experiment Mark Twain conducted. Being concerned about discord and strife, Twain built a cage, or at least so he says; "...and in it I put a dog and a cat. And after a little training I got the dog and the cat to the point where they lived peaceably together. Then I introduced a pig, a goat, a kangaroo, some birds, and a monkey. And after a few adjustments, they learned to live in harmony together. So encouraged was I by such successes that I added an Irish Catholic, a Presbyterian, a Jew, a Muslim from Turkestan, and a Buddhist from China, along with a Baptist missionary that I captured on the same trip. And in a very short while there wasn't a single living thing left in the cage!"

As the Psalmist says, "God sits in the heavens and laughs." And if that is so maybe we ought to join him.

How do we explain this kind of strife? 22 of the top 25 religion-in-the-news-stories dominated by conflict. Nobody left alive in the cage. Let's start with the sad realization that aggression seems to be hard-wired into the human brain. Somewhere back there in each of our brain-stems, in an old part inherited from the reptiles, there

seems to be an instinct to respond to threat with force. Find your cub blocked from the tree by a tourist and down goes the tourist. Put hay in the feeding trough, and the larger ewes will get there first, knocking their lambs out of the way if necessary. Sprinkle blood on the water and a feeding frenzy follows. Face it folks, nature is red in tooth and claw. And we are an integral part of nature! If you still claim to have a clear conscience, let remind you that's usually the sign of a bad memory.

Add to these dynamics, the fundamental importance of religion, and no, it doesn't seem likely that we will use the word "fight" less often in the future. Being part of nature, we are compared biblically speaking, to flowers of the field which flourish in the morning, but are compost by evening. Our lives are haphazardly constructed. We are vulnerable and unprotected, and deep down, whether we admit it or not, anxious. The simple truth is, however, that we don't admit that to ourselves very often. We do acknowledge this reality at the time of prayer toward the end of our worship, and this room gets very quiet. Although we are usually highly defended against the reality that we live our lives at the edge of an abyss, we let our guard down in those moments of prayer and name situations and names which reveal how precarious life is.

But we can't live with such an awareness during every waking moment. It would paralyze us. Life goes on. There are things to do, people to meet, and we push our vulnerability out of sight and out of mind.

Given our vulnerabilities however, and an attending, basic state of anxiety, we need bulwarks, defenses, "hope, healing, peace, consolation and inspiration." Many of us turn therefore to religion. But it is not only anxiety that we experience in the midst of life is it? We also know what it means to be grateful. Despite its uncertainties, life also has its joys, which for us especially, among the world's most fortunate, are abundant. What's not to like about living in Morris County? Yeah its cold right now, mid-winter, but our homes are heated, the larder is full, and Wal Mart is open this afternoon! If you can't muster up some gratitude for the gift of life here, you really do need an attitude adjustment! So we are thankful, grateful. Again we turn to religion as a means for expressing our gratitude and thanks.

So suppose that someone comes along and takes a shot at your religion, your carefully cultivated faith. Is not something in the reptilian part of your brain likely to react? Diss my god, diss me. Disrespect the goose who laid the golden-egg of my life, and you've got a problem buster. Religion is a bulwark against the madness and meaninglessness of life - mess with it and you mess with me! Human beings go to great lengths to defend and protect their religion, because we cling to it as if to a life raft.

What we forget however, is that God doesn't need our protection or help. We run to the ramparts, and it's conflict 22 out of 25 times. Reinhold Niebuhr was a realist about these things. Religious conflict is sad but true, and probably even inevitable,

given how important our belief systems are to us. But what sustained Niebuhr was this passage from the second Psalm. We forget that God doesn't need to be protected or defended, and the one "who sits in the heavens laughs." Given that, maybe we should too. I don't know if the word "fight" will be seen less often, but maybe a way to deal with religion's PR problem is to nourish a sense of humor. If we can't laugh at ourselves, if we take ourselves too seriously, the ramparts and conflict beckon.

Maybe you heard the kid in the fourth row last week who during the sermon asked her mother "if we give him the money now, will he let us go?"

"No-o-o, her mother replied, and if you're not quiet, he might lose his place and have to start over at the beginning." Little girl settled right down.

When the offering was finally taken, a kid in the fifth row said to his father, you don't need to pay for me, I'm under five.

Eventually one hopes, these children will learn some respect. They probably don't realize how difficult this job is. It is a well known fact that the most feared event in life is public speaking, followed by death. This means that it is less stressful during a funeral to be in the casket than to stand here and deliver the eulogy.

Oh, and a word to the wise from Yogi Berra, always go to other people's funerals, otherwise they won't go to yours.

In the bleak mid-winter friends, one of our last defenses is humor. Therefore I encourage you to:

Support bacteria - they're the only culture some people have.

Save the whales. Indeed, collect the whole set.

And remember:

If at first you don't succeed, then sky-diving isn't for you, and...

The secret to staying calm in a crises is not to have all the facts.

Furthermore, it should be acknowledged:

Men like women with a past because they hope history will repeat itself.

(He who laughs last thinks slowest.)

Also, it can't be denied, Chaucer had talent. But he couldn't spell.

Come to church my friends, and I promise you if I'm elected president: no bad news; we'll only pass the offering plates once; and we will continue to deal with life's persistent questions. I mean, ask yourselves in all seriousness:

Why is the word abbreviation so long?

How come Superman could stop bullets with his chest, but always ducked when someone threw a gun at him?

Why is lemon juice mostly artificial ingredients but dishwashing liquid contains real lemons?

How much deeper would the ocean be if sponges didn't grow in it?

Whose cruel idea was it for the word "lisp" to have an "s" in it?

What do little birdies see when they get knocked unconscious?

And what would the speed of lightning be, if it didn't zig-zag?

Finally, if it's true that we are here to help others, then what exactly are the OTHERS here for?

My friends, I trust and hope that like Mark Twain, you have never heard a sermon from which you have not derived some good. Although after this morning you'll have to admit, there have been some near misses.

It's been said that listening to a sermon is like a cold snap. You know somehow that it's good for you, but still, given mid-winter blahs, you wonder how much longer it's going to last! Well, as luck would have it, the U.S. Government Printing Office offers a pamphlet called a "Preaching Guide for U.S. Military Chaplains." It presents suggestions on how to "start, expedite, and stop preaching." As it turns out the last part is easy. In order to stop preaching, you just....