**Apocalyptic Hope**

DECEMBER 4, 2012 BY BRUCE SANGUIN

We tend to associate Advent with a season of waiting for the birth of the baby Jesus. Yet on the first Sunday of Advent, year after year, we hear the mini-apocalypse readings. I kind of enjoy this in a twisted way, because the first Sunday also lifts up the theme of hope. The challenge is to set hope side by side with the apocalypse.

Luke 21:25:  ”There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves.

26: People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”

Sounds like a pretty fair description of the 21st century: catastrophic weather events, tsunamis, climate change, extinction of species, war in the Middle East, political upheaval in Egypt, the endless media coverage about the U.S. falling of the fiscal cliff in the U.S., warnings of a global economic recession.

My denomination, United Church of Canada, is also on life support.  Some of you may have seen some statistics that a friend of mine, Rev. David Ewart, gathered. The upshot is that if the current trends continue, by the year 2050, every conceivable measure—from number of members to number of baptisms—will be pretty much at zero. Today we don’t need signs in the sun and the moon and the stars. We have statistics to remind us that the sky is falling.

If we try to face these realities from the perspective and orientation of our small, separate selves, the only possible reaction is what Robert Lifton called “psychic numbing”. It’s simply too overwhelming. This is reflected in our politicians failure of leadership as they continually cater to our fear-based instinct for survival, promising “job creation” ad nauseum (as the ticket to re-election). As Leonard Cohen puts it, “Everybody Knows”, but we’re pretending not to because we lack a perspective that is empowering.

“Everybody knows that the boat is leaking

 Everybody knows that the captain lied
Everybody got this broken feeling
Like their father or their dog just died

Everybody talking to their pockets
Everybody wants a box of chocolates
And a long stem rose
Everybody knows”

Jesus knew, but he took the longview, the Kin(g)dom view, that the very presence of the crisis was a sign that a new order of consciousness, a new culture, and a new social/political order was about to be born.

21:29 Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees;21:30 as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near.

31 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.

32 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place.

33 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

It’s my position that Jesus with that last line Jesus wasn’t talking about the literal end of the world. The “passing away” of heaven and Earth is meant metaphorically. He’s talking about the world as we knew it before the Great Emergence, before the Advent of G\_d. He’s talking about the passing of a culture that was no longer lit up by possibility and hope, and the arrival of a new order that was vibrating with vision. Jesus knew his scriptures, and so he knew that this is simply the nature of G\_d to be doing what the prophet Isaiah called “ a new thing”. Behold, says G\_d, I’m doing a new thing. It is springing forth (like a bud). Do you not perceive it (Isaiah).

This Advent season is auspicious for being the end of the Mayan long count calendar. Some Mayan Elders appeared at the UN headquarters, telling the world that this is not the ‘end of the world’ but the ‘beginning of the whole-world’ as humanity re-members our connections with the living Earth and the wider Cosmos.  This is the Advent orientation.

It’s also the orientation that is natural to evolutionary theology.

Cosmologist, Brian Swimme, defines faith as the rock solid trust in a “nearby domain of emergence”. He means by this that where one person sees only a dead, winter twig, the person of faith anticipates the budding of the leaf. More than this, she organizes her every life, not around the apparent deadness, but rather the invisible vitality that is going to put leaves on that twig.

Brian Swimme is a scientist. He didn’t come to this through religion. He came to it by studying the large-scale structure of the evolving cosmos, and drawing some conclusions about the nature of Reality. He isn’t merely blindly hoping that somehow an external G\_d is going to suddenly intervene and make things alright with the world. That’s not hope. That’s magic, and it’s okay for children, but unbecoming of grown-ups. Swimme has developed a hope for the world that is evidence-based.

He takes a look at cataclysmic (apocalyptic) events, like the heat death of a supernova, the oxygen crisis is early Earth, five planetary extinctions, and draws some conclusions about an inherent creativity and intelligence of the Whole Living Universe that functions, not in spite of cataclysms, but through them. We can extend this dynamic to human culture and recognize a pattern. That with the emergence of each worldview there is an apocalyptic challenge. The very solutions to the problems of one worldview, become the problem for an emergent worldview to solve.

Fossil fuels were the solution to the “problem” of the need for energy to fuel the Industrial Revolution. This solution has itself become one of the central problems for 21st century humans to solve. In an evolutionary worldview these emergent problems become the provocations of new intelligences. There are, of course, not guarantees. If we choose to keep our heads up our butts and go on as though we’re not in crisis, then we’re hooped.

Warning: Theology Ahead!

In Advent we’re not waiting for the birth of the baby Jesus. Yes, we retell the story, because it is an occasion of The Word becoming flesh—to shift into theological language.  The Word is the creative principle of the universe, the Intelligence and the Love of an Originating Essence (G\_d). G\_d gives birth to and implicates Itself/Herself/Himself in an evolutionary process which is the incarnation of this Originating Unity, now manifesting in glorious diversity-in-unity. The story of the birth of Jesus is a wonderful myth that captures this Mystery that is generalized to the entire universe.

We are the Word made flesh—a new human for a new age. We are the very presence of all of that divine creativity that is in the death, in the crises of our lives, and as well in the greening, in the budding forth of new possibilities. Christ is indeed coming, Christ is always in the process of coming, of being born in the hearts of those who stake their lives and their future on a deep trust in a nearby domain of emergence that needs them in order to realized.

We celebrate Jesus as both the presence of the crisis and the birth of a new order.  After 13.7 billion years, the Spirit-animated evolutionary process, imbued with the Intelligence and the Heart of the divine, assumes flesh, and shakes up the Roman Empire. A new heart for a new age is born. A new mind for a new reality is born. A new wisdom for a new order is born. This birth shakes the foundations of consciousness, culture, and politics in 1st century Palestine. Jesus is the new thing G\_d is doing. It has taken the world a full 2000 years to come to terms with what this birth means. We’re still coming to terms with it.

But here’s the important piece in it all. The birth of Jesus of Nazareth is just a glimpse of a new future. This story is a story of the trajectory of a Spirit-animated universe evolving in and toward the Heart and Mind of G\_d. But if Advent is not a season of preparation for a new birth of Christ for our age, then it is little more than a nostalgic remembering of some golden age of the past. Jesus himself would not abide such a festival. He was future oriented. He was the very presence of whatever that creative, life impulse is that causes twigs to bud. He was leaning into the future that was being born through him and his disciples.

Now, more than ever, we need communities of faith that are willing to step up and be exemplars of what the prophet Jeremiah called the Righteous Branch. Think of “righteous” here not in terms of morality, but rather those who are in right relationship with the sacred, dynamic impulse of Christ to move forward, and be the new thing G\_d is doing.  The Righteous Branch is the beautiful and budding branch.

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