

A Sermon by Kurt Pluntke

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany

January 15, 2023

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People on earth live in their own reality. It is a social construction of how the world works and will never be complete since reality is subjective and multidimensional. However, there can be focus on an integrated whole, one with the sustainable grounding in the biosphere. Ideally it would be one we can rest true faith in. When we face this particular reality, we can begin to find ourselves not inside a polycrisis, but above it in an enlightened fashion. A true reality allows examination of our selves and its relation to things that sustain long term. It is without the techno contraptions we have put too much reliance and faith in. That reality will make readily evident our *Homo Collosus* nature of capitalist grooming, where we overshoot resources, land, energy and the biosphere's carrying capacity, as William Catton describes. To me that radiant warming is a signifier of a call to reflect on our way of life, our assumptions, and the limits of our technologies, if not its nihilistic tendencies. It also is a call to be prepared and resilient, with guarded optimism.

Unfortunately, many don't look up to see the wider significance of our own shining star. Whereas the wise men had their camels, I thought about how my own ship to carry me forward and how it came into being. It is constructed from planks of hardship, weathers of disappointment, and sails of suffering, which align with tenants in Catholic doctrine. Opposite a more positivist "justification by faith alone" doctrine, suffering is suppose to bring in spiritual growth and redemption, leading us to a life closer to Jesus. I wonder about that when I followed some of the biblical tenants, which unfortunately for me ended in spectacular fashion, returning angst and regret, not rewarding benevolence and appreciation. Is that beacon of 2000 years ago, and now shining ever more intensely overhead, a portending of suffering in order that we may embrace this teaching in order to become closer to God? I would rather avoid that workshop and go straight to the perfect state of being, but we may not have a choice. Being resilient and grounded is now a required preparatory step.

I appreciate being able to take this insight and speak about it in safe, listening spaces, like the one that Seekers here offers to explore the meaning of our faith. It is better that we are not passive, following hierarchies constructed by men. I think about how Pope Francis is using his position to manifest his calling, decentralizing an established institution. His encyclical, *Laudato Si*, speaks to care for the natural environment and all people who are part of it, sanctions the role and voices of women and lay people, and legitimizes the non-human world, even endorsing the idea that animals have souls. His allusion to the creation story as myth was a truth that really struck me in its veracity. I think he would be delighted to sit among us, where he would see our Seekers space as achieving the deconstruction of privilege, acceptance of difference with original voices, and welcoming the new seeker. This listening skill is important as the messages of meaning resonate in our own lives. This framework is a good one to find ones calling.

In my Earth and Spirit mission group, I brought up Michael Dowd's eco-theological lectures as discussion topic. The reality he spoke about was hard hitting for us. I found myself doom-scrolling his material, including of collapse threads on social forums. I found much grief and lamentations there. I understood the disrupted climate system to be symptomatic of overshoot, as articulated by William Catton decades ago. When I acted on this in the 2000s, I folded it into personal life decisions, and see now that it acted as sensible counsel. Awareness of the crisis in our planetary biosphere has put my past trauma into perspective, and quite frankly trivialized it. The knaveries of my consanguineous family became more a reflection of their deep hurt and suffering, than its impact on me. In odd team fashion, the magisterium of the Catholic Church with its rich traditions had its own organizational failing. The checks and balances of siblings and parents paralleled that of the priests, bishops and office of the Holy See, institutional failure evident when a single piece goes sideways. This made me think about what would be if rituals were instead rooted in natural processes, like the star shining above.

In the understanding of evolutionary theology, I am brought to examine the deeper meaning of these events and in my own experience. I remember a mystical experience I had as a child in a Christmas procession, where I was in communion with others in time and place, entering sacred space where I learned respect and deference. Decades later, I carried that forward to the ritual at my mom's grave. I constructed a cross in the same fashion as the others around. It was from very hard wood, a black walnut that took me days to cut which readily dulled my blades. The wood tone matched perfectly her complexion, something I hadn't realized until it stood among other light colored granite memorials, at a new cemetery on the hill. Her presence was manifest when the flower I threw onto her casket happened to roll and lay just across a small wooden cross I made. Its placement comported with her piety,

and belief of the sacred divine above all, as the white rose head fell just under the cross arm, not above it.

There is a radiant light beaming down on us, and it bears the greatest challenge of our generation. A search for the proper reality, to me, was paramount. Or was it faith? Maybe the two can co-exist. I did not want to fuel a false hope, a hopium that only serves to assuage, but instead wanted to embrace that which grounds the ecological basis of our living physical existence. Abrahamic religious traditions gave us the moral and ethical map, but that has led us to existential threats and the civilization-ending biosphere collapse. I noted a Canadian-French astrophysicist who put it succinctly, "Man is the most insane species. He worships an invisible God and destroys a visible Nature. Unaware that this Nature he's destroying is this God he's worshipping."

Last week Sharon alluded to an insight of reality with the recognition of the divine cosmos around us, in the actual present. I have understood the idea of 'naturalism' which describes the divine manifested in our reality. Inquiry into this area has produced many academic papers describing this religious/philosophical space. One that caught my attention is the concept of "enchanted naturalism" which embodies an approach to nature that is both grounded in scientific evidence as well as religious and spiritual inspiration. It is sacred, alive and full of mystery. I am inspired to delve into this enhanced bond of intimacy with the natural world, and honoring the mystery manifest in my religious upbringing. My calling spirit may return there. I wonder though, "has my religion been philosophized?. Is this dangerous territory?". If anything, it will fill me with an ethics of caring and self-discovery and acceptance. I don't want my religion, as National Catholic Reporter teases, to be a "diminishment ... into a kind of packaged behavior guide in thrall of a minimized God". Perhaps an enchanted mystical outlook is the hedge against a dire future, where many signs remind us of

what is real, what matters, so that we may live in and be part of a biosphere that functions with man, nature and our one planet earth.

That imagery of a childhood procession with beacon in hand entering the church from a wintry night with hymns echoing was a sacred space that beckoned. It helped to be in communion with peers, and realize that our collective action matters, especially on the political sphere, and can change the future that our radiant shining sun forebodes. If we pay attention, we may see our own calling, with its nature mystical and unknowing. In this season the passage in Isaiah 49 is germane, "You are my servant, in whom I will be glorified." and "I have toiled in vain, yet all the while my cause was with the Holy One". May our inspiration to find our call in a God manifested in nature before us never falter.