

# “Boundary Waters: an Advent Sermon” by Kate Amoss

November 28, 2010



## Advent 1

I love Advent. I love the candles, the stillness, and the quiet hush of anticipation. Once again I am irrationally hopeful. I expect magic and miracles. The Prince of Peace will be born again. I know in my heart that life and possibility dwell in midst of death. The contradictions of the world are not too much for me – not during Advent. Nature – – like Mary – is pregnant as she slows down and takes a nap. The buds for spring are already set even as the last brown leaves drift down from the empty branches. And as in our hymn today, “The Rose,” the seed is already planted that will in the spring become the rose. Much is hidden during Advent.

The scripture today is from Luke. Jesus is speaking of what we often call “the end times.” Heaven and earth will pass away and yet my words will not pass away. The powers of the heavens will be shaken. People will faint from fear and foreboding. The nations will be in great distress from the roaring of the sea and the waves. There will be signs in the

stars, the moon, and the sun. Jesus is speaking to his generation. He tells them that this will happen during their lifetime. If what Jesus says is true – I will hypothesize that it is (contrary to what others far more learned than I have said) – then the human family has been through “end times” at least once if not many times.

Perhaps, “end times” is one of those fences – one of those edges – that Jan Richardson speaks of so eloquently in our reflection paragraph: “When we learn to read the landscape of our fears, and when we come to know the terrain of every sorrow, then will we turn our fences into bridges and our borders into paths of peace.” As a therapist, I have accompanied many people through their own personal “end times.” My current favorite teacher, Cynthia Bourgeault, uses a computer metaphor to describe this concept, it is as if their current operating system is no longer sophisticated enough to process their lives adequately. In psychological terms, people feel overwhelmed, anxious, and despairing. They start losing their keys, their relationships, or even their livelihood. They want to eat too much chocolate, drink too much alcohol, play too many video games, run away, or sometimes just cease to exist. They show up for therapy – finally. They need help in shutting down the computer in order to install an upgraded operating system. In living into and through the chaos, people fairly reliably find more connection and peace on the other side. In exploring the terrain of their fears, the fences that they once thought kept them safe now create a bridge to the bigger life that they secretly always wanted.

Heaven and earth will pass away and yet my words will not pass away. In our passage from Luke, Jesus speaks of end times as a time similar to the time of new sprouts of leaves on the fig

tree – a time heralding summer. In using an image from nature, he seems to be suggesting that the earth is a living system that has the smaller life cycles of night and day, the medium life cycles of summer and winter, and the even larger life cycles of end times and renewal. The earth itself becomes chaotic every couple millennia or so. The earth itself needs to upgrade its operating system from time to time. I would suggest that we are in one of those times right now. I have a hard time listing all the natural disasters in the last few years for fear of forgetting some major ones. We have experienced the tsunami in Thailand in 2004, Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and the earthquake near Chengdu in China in 2008. This year we have experienced the earthquake and hurricane in Haiti, the flooding in Pakistan, and the volcanoes and flooding in Indonesia. We know that there is distress among nations. The powers of the heavens are being shaken. Global warming is named as the usual reason but perhaps global warming is part of an even larger pattern. Those who watch the stars are also naming unusual patterns. Thousands and thousands of pilgrims – one or two of whom I have met – have seen the sun do extraordinary loops in the sky in Medjugorke.

I know that I personally have to calm myself a lot so as not to give in to fear and foreboding about the future. How bad is it going to get? Can we switch to alternative energy systems before we completely befoul the planet with carbon emissions and oil spills? With all of the industrial and farm waste, is there going to be enough clean water for my grandchildren to drink? Will there be enough food if the farmlands keep eroding at the rate that they are currently eroding? Then there are my more personal fears. Will I be able to take care of myself in my old age without any social security or safety net? Will our son Christopher be safe until March as he finishes his yearlong contract to teach

English in South Korea? Our current systems do not seem sustainable to me. We need an upgraded operating system fast!

In 1977, Ilya Prigogine, a Russian-born theoretical chemist, working in Belgium, won a Noble Prize for his work in the field of thermodynamics. The second law of thermodynamics puzzled him. The second law states, whenever work is done, that energy is irretrievably lost. According to the second law, the universe is always moving towards more chaos or entropy. He noted that this seemed to contradict the observable process of evolution. Life forms on this planet have become more ordered not less. What Prigogine found was that in an open living system – unlike a closed system – that order arises not in spite of entropy but because of it! Living systems do become more and more chaotic until they reach what Prigogine called a bifurcation point – a moment of truth – when either the system breaks down and ceases to exist or it spontaneously reorganizes in an entirely more adaptive new way. The new reorganization is non-linear and non-causal – it is a quantum leap, a death and rebirth. Is Jesus speaking of this quantum leap in our passage from Luke? One of the most important open living systems on the planet is our own human nervous system. Pat Conover, in his thoughtful and far-reaching sermon of two weeks ago, reminds us that concepts and images are only human constructions and are limited and inadequate in their ability to give us the actual experience of god or – as I might prefer to say – to give us the actual experience of reality. Pat goes on to say that one of the most troubling concepts of Christianity as it has been practiced over the centuries is that of dualism, the division of the world into opposites: good and bad, spirit and body, heaven and hell, rich and poor.

Cynthia Bourgeault, when I heard her speak at the National Cathedral last May, also spoke of the pitfalls of dualistic thinking and she suggested that engaging in it was like having a binary operating system in the language of computers or an egoic consciousness in the language of psychology. Diane Wilkins, one of our Seekers alumni, gave a memorable sermon in the mid-nineties. She had painted a big black and white painting for us. During the sermon she cut holes in her painting and pulled out brilliantly colorful scarves from behind it. The miracle of Jesus is that he was able to experience the world in color, to go beyond the usual dualistic reality of black and white. Cynthia Bourgeault, in staying with her metaphor of an operating system, calls the operating system of Jesus, "non-dual" or "unitive." Perhaps this is why the teachings of Jesus are so very hard for us to understand and are so frequently misused to justify intolerance. The realm of god is not another better place nor is it a future utopian world, instead, it is a way of experiencing this every day world of ours with a more sophisticated nervous system that organizes sensory input in a more holistic way. How can you explain color to someone who has only ever seen black and white? Or even more importantly how do you teach someone to see in color?

I don't pretend to know very much about Christ consciousness but I do know something about going beyond what I thought was possible for myself. Last June I joined a canoe expedition to the Boundary Waters, a wilderness area on the border of Minnesota and Canada. I had first heard about the Boundary Waters from Cheryl Hellner and Jim Hall, whom many of you know from Dayspring Church. Years ago I had helped Cheryl create a quilt that used the blues and greens of the lakes, trees, and sky of this special place. It held a mythical significance for me so when CathyAnn Beaty, an InterPlayer from St. Paul, asked me if I wanted to go with her and two other

InterPlayers, Tom Henderson and George Edens from North Carolina, I didn't think much about it – I just said yes. I knew practically nothing of what would be expected before I went – for which I am eternally grateful, as I almost certainly would have opted out had I known. I did not know that I would be carrying a fourteen-foot canoe over my head by myself for half a mile over rough and rocky terrain. I did not know that I would be carrying packs so heavy that it would take two people to get them on my back or that I would need to wade thigh deep in thick black swamp muck to bring the canoe to shore. I did not know that I would be paddling against the wind for miles over open lakes or that the park rangers would require me to practice scaring bears away before I was allowed to even get into my canoe. I am not the most courageous person in the world nor am I the most athletic. Plus I have always assumed that my back and joints are rather delicate and in need of a fair amount of pampering. Furthermore, being innocent of what would be required, I had done very little to physically prepare myself.

I know that I got through the week by paying great attention to each moment. It was as if the extraordinary beauty of the place had heightened my awareness so that again and again I was able to walk through a mystical portal that opened for me. I found that by taking one step at a time that I could keep on finding strength that was well beyond the strength that I knew myself to possess. It was as if the shifting light and ethereal love-songs of the loons gave me magical gifts of fortitude. Beyond the edge of what I thought I could physically do, I found a self beyond myself. In our passage from Luke, Jesus is counseling us how to deal with the boundaries of what is known. He tells us to stay alert, to “be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries

of this life.” If the quality of attention that Jesus calls us to is anything like what I experienced on my canoe trip, it is a very humbling experience, a time of simple trust – that moment when we find a self beyond ourselves.

I was very fortunate this Easter to have spent some time in Bethlehem, a sleepy little town on the West Bank – not so different than it might have been centuries ago. I saw the dry yellow hills outside the town where the shepherds had watched their flocks. I saw the shiny golden star in the white marble, the place deep inside the Church of the Nativity where Jesus once lay in the manger. The marble had a gentle indentation in it, worn away by the kisses of so many pilgrims.

On the Saturday before Easter, Maher, a music teacher at a local school that Billy had met through the foundation and his wife, Jihanne, invited us to dinner at their home. They lived inside a refugee camp at the edge of Bethlehem. As we walked into the camp, we saw that the cement walls of the camp that looked so ugly from the outside had been carefully painted on the inside, each section of wall was of a town that had once been the home of someone now living in the camp. The murals were brightly colored; they showed fruit trees, birds, flowers, lovely churches, and mosques – all the murals that is except for one which was a gray image of a single tent inside a big wall. The name on that mural was Aida Camp and the date was 1956.

As we climbed up towards the apartment where Maher and Jihanne lived, we walked along a dirt road. Around us there were dusty buildings that were broken and crumbling. Bricks and pieces of plaster in the road made it difficult to walk.

There were no flowers, no plants, and no birds. The flat roofs of buildings were cluttered with vats for collecting water, generators for creating electricity, and huge antennas. Yet Maher and Jihanne had created a beautiful home inside their dirty broken building. They fed us a delicious chicken dinner with an endless number of salads and dips. We got to meet their young son, Makhmud. He was only six months old and full of smiles. His eyes were sparkling and dark, the color of black olives. He doesn't yet know that he is growing up inside walls, trapped by an old story that is badly in need of changing. But Makhmud gave me faith, as did Maher and Jihanne. The name of the camp, Aida, means "hope." Where there is love there is always hope. Where there is good nurturing, mothering and fathering, there is always hope – new stories, new operating systems are possible. The walls can become an invitation to a bigger life instead of a reminder of limitations. We can believe in a self beyond ourselves.

In InterPlay we often do dances on behalf of someone or something. This morning I feel moved to invite Sheri and Billy to do a dance with me on behalf of Makhmud, the child of Bethlehem. This is for him and for you too.

"This is to Mother You" by Sinead O'Connor.