

December 10, 2017 – The 2nd Sunday in Advent

On Earth As In Heaven, a sermon by Nancy S. Taylor, Senior Minister, Old South Church in Boston

Oliver Wendell Holmes admonished Christians in these words: “Don’t be so heavenly minded, as to be of no earthly good.” Coming, as it does, from Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes – of blessed memory -- a Boston based a physician, poet, and polymath; many of whose works were published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, a magazine he founded and named; who taught medicine at Dartmouth and Harvard; who coined the word "anesthesia" and the phrase “Boston Brahmin”; who penned a poem about our church entitled: “The Brave Old South”...as the admonishment arises from the brilliant Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, it is worth paying some attention to, worth pondering, worth the most serious consideration. “Don’t be so heavenly minded, Christian, as to be of no earthly good.”

In the Christian season of Advent, the admonishment is especially pertinent as we oft-times find ourselves looking up, peering into the heavens, what with the stars and angels singing and dancing over the Savior’s impending birth; what with the wise men, the Magi, looking up, tripping over stones, as they chase the star; what with the heavenly host lighting up the sky with trumpets blasting and harps a-strumming in celebration of the Christ Child. But Oliver Wendell Holmes yanks our gazes back here; jerks our eyes earthward, planet-ward, “Don’t be so heavenly minded, as to be of no earthly good.”

And, isn’t that what God is doing, too, in Advent, in slipping into human flesh, donning mortality and materiality, and settling in here, on this Earth, among us, one of us? Isn’t God calling us from our heavenly reveries to that which is material and mortal?

Isn’t that, after all, the very purpose of the Christmas story? To admonish us: stop looking off into the heavens, beyond the clouds to what might or might not be of eternity and mystery. Heaven, eternal bliss, or whatever finally awaits us, is not, primarily, what God calls us to; is not what God sends his Child to.

You see, God sent Jesus to a planet slowly turning in the cold, dark of space; a planet tethered to a particular Sun, bound to a certain Moon; a planet with atmosphere and gravity, lithosphere and hydrosphere, ocean tides and tectonic plates. God sent Jesus to this blue and green and marbled orb, tilted and rotating and rife with life... resplendent, radiant and oozing with life.

God sent Jesus to Earth and the truth is, the confession we need to confess is that Earth’s troubles and travails, Earth’s imperiled status, Earth’s plight and predicament can be laid, must be laid, at our feet: at the feet of Western Christianity. For, the hard truth is that Western Christianity is guilty of a terrible, catastrophic theological heresy, a biblical heresy, a sacrilege borne of human hubris, pride and vanity.

What sacrilege? What heresy? This: the belief, the boast, that we humans, the two-leggeds, we homo sapiens, are more important to God than all the rest of what God has made. The belief, the heresy, the boast and vanity – taught and passed down, generation after generation – that all the rest of what God has made (rainforest and mountain, elephant and dung beetle, ocean and river, soaring eagle and busy bee) is merely for our disposal, our employment or enjoyment, our utilization or exploitation; that nature, that the Earth, is just for us (as a toy to a child), that it is not in and of itself beloved, sacred, cherished, worthy. The belief, the heresy, the boast, that despite Copernicus's discovery to the contrary, the whole wide cosmos really does revolve around our little globe. That despite everything Darwin revealed, we cannot help but situate ourselves apart from and above the natural process. That despite all evidence to the contrary, we think of ourselves, and we act as though we are superior to nature. (– Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis" 1967)

The belief, the heresy, the boast, the vanity that the Earth's offerings (of mineral, plant and animal; of beauty and sustenance) are all and only for the benefit of one animal – the one and only animal, by the way, for which God was forced to institute laws ... because this animal (humans, homo sapiens, we of the very large brains), unlike the lion and the shark, kills more than it needs to survive; kills wantonly, murders wantonly, pillages entire ecosystems --not for need, not for necessity -- but for the joy of it, the delight of it, the sport of it, the heady, adrenaline of it, for the satisfactions of wealth and power, for the pleasure of dominion and domination. This animal alone is capable of rapacious destruction of that which God loved into being.

I started with Oliver Wendell Holmes because, somehow, we've gotten ourselves cross-wise with our own scriptures and I am hoping that Oliver Wendell Holmes' wise, pithy, spot-on admonition – Don't be so heavenly minded, as to be of no earthly good – might penetrate our extra-large brains in a way that our holy scriptures have not managed to do.

In the season of Advent, the church tells and cherishes the story of God coming to Earth, to this planet, as an infant: holy and innocent, tender and precious. In turn, the Earth and the Creatures of the Earth receive the Holy Child, shelter and celebrate him.

It is meet and right, then, meet and right and our bounden duty – for God's sake, for Christ's sake, for the Holy Child's sake – to tear our gaze from heavenly things and plant it here, to look upon, to consider the wreck we have made of it. And then to do what Christians are trained and taught to do: confess and repent and change our errant ways.

As a practitioner of Western Christianity, I confess that atmospheric carbon dioxide has risen to insupportable levels; that the Earth's average surface temperature has risen about 2.0 degrees Fahrenheit since the late 19th century; that God's glaciers are in catastrophic retreat and God's icebergs are melting and God's seas are rising.

I confess the acidification of our oceans; that my species is razing Rainforests and killing off whole species, and endangering others.

I confess that God's Good Earth – this lovely, precious, fragile marbled orb—is being convulsed by extreme weather events: earthquake and fire, hurricane and tsunami.

Moreover, I confess and acknowledge that Western Christianity bears more than its share of the blame and shame for the state of things. I confess that Western Christianity has promoted a dualism between the realm of History and the Realm of Nature; has promoted, has posited the position that the Realm of History is more important, more sublime than that of Nature ... promoted the proposition that History is the real stage upon which God and humans live and work out salvation; that the Realm of Nature is subservient to, beneath, and less sublime than the Realm of History; that Nature is, as it were, merely the floorboards, the stage or platform upon which we act out our grand and noble parts.

I confess that as Western Christianity scoffed at paganism and ridiculed animism it stole the birthright from plants and animals, robbing all flora and fauna of divine favor.

Confession is one thing. Repentance and atonement are quite another.

On the very eve of the Holy Child's impending birth, of his coming to Earth, what's a Christian to do?

Don't be so heavenly minded, as to be of no earthly good.

Regard the Earth as a patient in need of healing, in desperate need of attention, of care, of treatment, recuperation, and rest. Dr Oliver Wendell Holmes widely promoted the use of the stethoscope in diagnosis as a means of listening in, deeply listening, into the inside of a person. Might we train ourselves, apply ourselves, concern ourselves with listening to the earth, to its deep innards: to its beating and pulsing, its breathing and heaving, its convulsing and shuddering, its quaking and fracking?

Might we change our ways and learn to live with an attentive kindness toward the Earth and its creatures?

Might we become followers and devotees of Francis of Assisi? Francis believed in the virtue of humility; a virtue not only for the individual person, but for humans as a species. Francis believed in the democracy of all God's creatures: a democracy between and among Brother Ant and Sister Fire, Brother Sun and Sister Moon, Mother Earth and Brother Man. Francis was a radical follower of Jesus who fully intended to topple humankind from the high throne upon which we placed ourselves, ruling (not benignly, not as stewards, but cruelly, wantonly) over all the Creation. "In his view, all created things, animate and inanimate, are designed for the glorification of God who, in the ultimate gesture of cosmic humility, assumed flesh, lay in a

manger and, finally, hung, dying on a scaffold.” (– Lynn White, *The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis* 1967)

What else is a Christian to do? Well, it is in our DNA, Old South Church, to raise a ruckus, raise our voices, to speak up, speak out. For nearly 350 years this church has found its voice on behalf of the voiceless. Taking our cue from God’s concern for the helpless, for the widow and orphan, for the enslaved and suffering Hebrews, we have raised our voices and become as allies for the oppressed and marginalized, for women and enslaved persons, for LGBTQ+ folk and the imprisoned, for the refugee and the homeless, for immigrant and indigent. It is time, high time we find our voices for the Earth ... whose only way of voicing its pain is in the convulsions of earthquake and fire.

Earlier I noted a poem about us by Oliver Wendell Holmes: “The Brave Old South”. But there is another poem that speaks into this moment. A poem by John Greenleaf Whittier, “In the Old South Church.” The final stanza:

So long as Boston shall Boston be,
And her bay-tides rise and fall,
Shall freedom stand in the Old South Church,
And plead for the rights of all!

And plead for the rights of all! Plead for rights of Brother Polar Bear and Sister Penguin, of Sister Water and Mother Earth.

I imagine it would warm our Savior’s heart, I imagine it would do Jesus good, I imagine we could give God the greatest Christmas gift ever, were we to heed the pithy admonition of a brilliant poet: Don’t be so heavenly minded, Christian, as to be of no earthly good.

The Earth needs us. Desperately. Urgently. The Earth that God loved into being needs us, all of us: our confession and repentance, our actions and interventions and, not least, our restraint.

In this holy season of Advent, as we prepare our hearts and our homes for the coming of Jesus, for God’s sake, for Christ’s sake, Don’t be so heavenly minded, as to be of no earthly good.

SOURCES. “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis”, by Lynn White Jr (1967) / *Gaia & God*, by Rosemary Radford Ruther / *Poems of the Old South* (1877).

SCRIPTURE. The sermon is based on selected verses from throughout our scriptures. From the Lord’s Prayer: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” From the Prophet Habakkuk: “For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.” From the Prophet Isaiah: “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the

lion shall eat straw like the ox. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.”

BENEDICTION

May God give us grace never to sell ourselves short; grace to risk something big for something good; grace enough to be generous to the poor at home and the poor around the world; grace to comprehend that the Earth is too small for anything but love. And too dangerous for anything but truth. So, may God take our minds and think through them. May God take our lips and speak through them. May God take our hearts and set them on fire. The blessing of God: Creator, Christ and Fiery Spirit, be with you this day and every day.