

Opening Words

We are here,
after a week of snow and bitter cold,
to worship, to sift experience
in the fingers of the mind and heart and body,
to feed our hunger for a kinder world. And so

As we move through this year of transition and joy, we remember with gratitude the power of our living heritage, which moves through time like a clear running creek; refreshing us with the sweet draughts of courage, hope, justice-making, peaceful living, ever deeper honesty, and more truthful loving. And so we kindle this light in thanksgiving.

Sequence

Here I am, here you are, within the embrace of something very grand called the Universe. They say it began from something smaller than the head of a pin. Angels may not dance on the head of that pin, as they insisted a thousand years ago, but, I wonder, does that mean, then, that human beings are the only ones left waltzing across it?

Here I am, here you are in the United States of America, a land with a history that both inspires me and makes me weep, a land of both the courageous and the corruptible. It's home to more than just the free and the brave, certainly. But, I wonder, can I count myself free if others aren't? Or brave, if fellow citizens still sleep in the cold?

Here I am in my body, here you are in your bodies, each the fruit of four billion years of evolution. Because of experience, this body, at least, has known both rage and joy. It's closed down in defense and opened in vulnerability. I have grown thorns at the same time I open like rose. I have been tight as a bud, but I have also blossomed like a tulip. But, I wonder, what is Your nature, Ground in which I grow? Or You, Light which lifts me from the earth to blossom me?

Now I release myself into these questions and let them float in silence.

silence

There are many people with whom I share this world. Billions. But, I wonder, who are the ones among all those billions that most inhabit my heart? Are they friends or family? Are they opponents or the loud? Are they the quiet or the troubled? Who?

Since they are here whether I see them or not, I name them, whispered, or in the silent sanctuary of the heart, so that I may bow to them, and acknowledge them at the very center of this celebration.

naming

Music is a mystery like the universe, as complex as a nation, as vital as a living body. Poetry, too, is a place that shelters us, a richness, a home. Let us be so bold as to enter the shrine where music and poetry are as one, that something within us might blossom.

Readings

The First Reading comes from George Mardsen's most excellent study "*Fundamentalism and American Culture*," the new edition of 2006. Dr. Mardsen is a professor of history at Notre Dame University.

In the wake of the Revolution, Americans saw themselves as inaugurators of a new order for the ages. The new order was conceived as a return to a pristine human condition. For Protestants, this ideal was readily translated into "The Bible alone should be one's guide."

This attitude toward the Bible was closely related to religious individualism, and also encouraged by revivalism, which lifted up the idea that the individual stood alone before God. The church, important, was made up of free individuals.

Fundamentalism is best understood as a sub-species of American revivalism, which maintained the important distinction between the natural and the supernatural. All the key doctrines depended on this. The traditional fundamentals---the inerrancy of scripture, the Virgin Birth, the miracles of Christ, the sub-stitutionary Atonement, and bodily Resur-rection—all involved the supernatural. Hope for the future, thus, lay only in divine intervention, not human effort.

This strong revivalist tradition in America doubtless contributed to the tendency to see things in terms of simple antitheses (i.e. opposites.) The revivalist believed the universe was divided into the realm of God and the realm of Satan, the righteous and unrighteous. Revi-valist hymns were full of simple contrasts between joy and sorrow, turmoil and rest, weak-ness and strength, darkness and light, defeat and victory, purity and impurity, guilt and forgiveness, the saved and the lost. In this world-view, ambiguity was rare. Transitions never occurred gradually, but were, like the conversion experience itself, radical transformations from one condition to its opposite.

The Second Reading comes from Margo Perkins' *Exploring New Spaces: A Dialogue with Black Women on Religion, Culture, and Spirituality*, 1995. I find this to be a beautiful memoir.

As an African American woman, socialized into the southern Black Baptist tradition, I have begun to see Christianity as inextricably bound to my identity. Even if I should someday practice another religion, the most I will ever be allowed to be...is a *not-Christian*. In any event, Christianity seems the inescapable point of reference marking African American identity. The rituals, music, and ethos associated with the Baptist religious practice of my youth provide a sense of connection, not just to my family, but even more profoundly, to the history of African Americans. I am deeply moved by the songs, by the joy of fellowship, and the warm embrace of the elders. To have participated in that celebration of thanks and praise is to understand that place where Aretha reaches to sing "Bridge Over Troubled Water" or Sweet Honey In the Rock. If it were only these impressions I experienced, my relationship to Christianity would not be an ambivalent one.

However, there is a strong sense of intellectual alienation. I do not give my consent, for example, to the sexism, the homophobia, the proselytism, to the erasure of individual difference...all of which have marked my experience of Christian culture. I further do not consent to the imposition in the name of religion of one culture's values onto another, or to the misuse of religious doctrine to dominate or exploit. I do not know whether the paradox of Christianity, as both a liberating and oppressive force in the struggle of African American people historically, is one that I can ever reconcile.

Sermon

If you can do it without a great deal of inconvenience, take out a dollar bill.

On it, on the opposite side of the George Washington portrait, you will find an incomplete pyramid, with an eye within a triangle that finishes the pyramid. That, according to its designer, congressional secretary Charles Thomas, in 1782, is the "eye of Providence." "Providence" was a word used by many Revolutionary Era people as a substitute for the word "God." The word "Providence" was favored by people who, like John Adams, or Thomas Jefferson, were "deists," that is, folks who believed some Force was behind the universe, behind liberty even. But it was not a personal Force, a Person which really could be counted on to pay attention to the "fall of a sparrow," or ordinary human concerns, like some biblical portraits of deity insist.

Over the eye, you will find a Latin phrase, *Annuet Coeptis*. This is an unusual phrase, to be sure, with an unstated subject. But it translates best into English as "Providence Favors Our Undertakings." What undertakings? The founding of a new nation, "conceived in liberty." Underneath both eye and incomplete pyramid, you will find another Latin phrase "Novus Ordo Saeculorum." This means "A New Order for the Ages." Our word "secular" comes from that last word, meaning simply "the ages."

Now this line on the national seal, *New Order for the Ages*, is clearly quoted in our first reading, by Dr. Mardsen.

*In the wake of the Revolution, Americans saw themselves as inaugurators of a **new order for the ages**. The new order was conceived as a return to a pristine human condition. For Protestants, this ideal was readily trans-lated into "The Bible alone should be one's guide."*

A new order. No kings or queens. No people with special privileges. Just an agreement. A covenant between free people. What they called the constitution. It wasn't really a new idea... the native Iroquois people governed themselves by something quite similar, and the idea of covenant was certainly found centrally in the Scriptures...especially in those passages which spoke of the nation of Israel before the famous dynasty of King David was established by violence. As it intones in the Book of Judges more than once: "*In those days, there was no king over Israel, and the people did just as they pleased.*"

This individualism and the anti-privilege, anti-authority sentiment echoed in much of the writings of the founders of our nation. And, as Dr. Mardsen makes clear, these ideas found intersection with the revivalist religious movements among the Protestants, who made up the majority of our nation's first colonial inhabitants. These revivals were sort of rallies, like you might have before a high school football game. Why did they arise? Because so many of the original and quite passionate religious convictions of the Pilgrims and Puritans had thinned out

over the years, so that attending church became more a cultural thing than a real expression of conviction and purpose. Some of the more religious folk were concerned that their youth were going to abandon the Protestant congregations entirely. Many of the younger folk no longer went to communion, following the lead, perhaps, of many of the more deistic leaders of the nation, like George Washington, for example, who always walked out before the Lord's Supper was celebrated at his Episcopal church. Even religious liberals, like our own ancestors...I'm thinking of Ralph Waldo Emerson...worried about the differences between "received" Unitarianism and directly experiential religion in the individual heart...we would say "spirituality" in modern jargon. Like Washington, Emerson too refused any communion ceremony that only ritually "remembered" someone who had lived long ago. You can't call Emerson a revivalist, exactly...his theology was way too rich, cerebral, complex and personal for that. But you can certainly suspect with good reason that he was influenced by the same basic worries about authenticity that bothered more conservative religious folk. And he too, like the revivalists, and most religious liberals, championed the individual conscience and spirit. Thus, there are, as you can see, strange overlaps in American religion between the very liberal and very conservative, between the intellectual and the emotional.

So, little by little, a culture of revivals spread across the infant nation. The preaching was stirring and long...*hours*-long in some cases. Cool wooden meeting houses were abandoned for the outdoors. Everything was going to be hip, engaging. The music was designed to stir and uplift. The lyrics, as Mardsen makes clear, were simplified. *Revivalist hymns were full of simple contrasts between joy and sorrow, turmoil and rest, weakness and strength, darkness and light, defeat and victory, purity and impurity, guilt and forgiveness, the saved and the lost.*" The compassionate, ethical message of Jesus, that had moved a cool deist like Jefferson to write a book about him, was reduced by the revivalists into the message *about* Jesus, Jesus Christ as the Savior whose death redeemed the lost. This message was called an evangelical message, because it was the distillation the evangel, an old word for gospel, according to those who preached it.

This revivalist attitude crossed institutional lines. There was, after all, no First Revivalist church, only Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, even some Congregationalists, who were changed by its emotional outreach. Several new religious movements, which are peculiarly American, were generated by decade after decade of revivalism and its stress on individual relationships to God. I am thinking about Seventh Day Adventism, The Latter Day Saints, or Mormon movement, and later in the century, the Jehovah's Witnesses. But, as Mardsen affirms, when the Darwinian way of looking at things began to enter the public sphere, the people from all denominations who were affected by the revival movement felt attacked and threatened. After all, for almost a hundred years, they had been raised that the supernatural and the natural were different orders of reality. Now, here come Darwin and his followers, asserting that the whole earth, from every mountain range to every deep sea, from every beetle wing to every sea slug, from every whale eye to every human pupil, could be explained with reference to only *one* world...the natural world. Darwin, of course, didn't go around bashing the supernatural world, nor did most of his followers. They weren't fighting any such battles. Scientists were not culture warriors, yet.

But eventually battle lines of a sort were drawn. As the 19th century gave way to the 20th, men like Billy Sunday, a Presbyterian revivalist, went around in tents, including here in Columbus, and electrified thousands. They demanded decisions...for or against. Yes or No. No maybes. No gray areas. No middle-ground. It was either Heaven. Or Hell. Around this time, some of the liberal preachers began to see what was happening and decided something needed to be done. The Protestant message was being reduced to something without either subtlety or reason. So

some preachers, as I pointed out in a sermon some years ago, including Washington Gladden here in Columbus, called out the revivalists as charlatans that had watered the ethical demands of the ancient teacher into some sort of fearful wager about life after death. The poor and marginalized were all around, shivering in the cold, ministers like Gladden opined, and yet the tent preachers were only offering brief spasms of excitement. They were not offering true gospel preaching, which was always social, always on behalf of the poor and outcast, and always profoundly ethical. Neither Darwin, or even Marx, aroused much fear in folks like Gladden, who, after all, was himself a socialist, or among our own ancestors. This open attitude threatened the revivalists also.

Eventually, between 1910 and 1915, the revivalists affirmed some basic *fundamentals*, as they called them, and published their final broadside in a series of pamphlets which lifted up the absolute inerrancy of scripture, the literal virgin conception, the bodily, not symbolic resurrection of Christ, the Last Judgment and the Blood Atonement. Within years, the revivalists were labeled by their few clear teachings as “those **Fundamentalists**.”

Now I know this word is often used to refer to Muslims and conservative Jews these days, or even certain Hindus. It’s a strange usage, I’d say, a journalistic attempt at finding interpretive parallels which are not really there. After all, so-called Muslim “fundamentalists” cannot teach the blood atonement of Christ since they deny he was even crucified in the first place. More confusingly, the words “conservative,” “right-wing reactionary” and “fundamentalist” are not necessarily synonyms. Because Protestant American Fundamentalism is just that: Protestant and American. Really conservative Roman Catholics or Eastern Orthodox Christians cannot fairly be called “Fundamentalists” either, although you may certainly find what may be called “ultra-Conservative” Catholics and Orthodox teachers, both doctrinally and politically. These are sometimes called “integrist.” But real Fundamentalists, rooted in the revivalist tradition, like those at Bob Jones University, spend a lot of their time writing books against all Catholics everywhere, no matter how conservative some claim to be. What I am saying is that just because there is a similar rigidity does not mean that there is “identity.” Just because there is agreement by evangelical fundamentalists and some conservative Roman Catholics on issues like gay marriage and abortion does not mean they are the same thing, by a long shot. Oh, listen, I know I have no chance at all to convince very many people of my case around this...the horse has left the barn long ago. But I do want to be clear at least for the length of this sermon.

Now the second reading this morning records a personal journey. Margo Perkins gives a beautiful summary of her Baptist upbringing, and how important it is to her identity...she can relate to the exciting place where Aretha Franklin “reaches” she says, when she is singing a song like Bridge Over Troubled Water. She can relate to the culture of her age in a rooted way. She appreciates community. Hugs. Care.

But, she says, she also experiences intellectual alienation from her church. “I do not give my consent,” she writes, “to the sexism, the homophobia, the proselytism, to the erasure of individual difference...” she finds in her religious upbringing. She does not support churches imposing their values on other cultures in this mixed culture nation of ours.

Ms. Perkins finds herself in a difficult place. She can name the oppressiveness of her conservative church background, and expresses her disagreement with it. She shows an enviable clarity. But she also notes that there is a certain liberation that comes from her church experience too, liberation supporting her struggle as an African American. She goes so far as to say that

even if she were to stop going to church, and cease being a member of her Baptist congregation, and join some other religion, she would still, at least for a while, feel more like a “not-Christian” than say, a Buddhist, or even Unitarian Universalist.

Margo Perkins recognizes the complexity of her situation. She recognizes that she has to decide, pick, choose, relate, struggle, and refuse to be rigid or absolutist as she faces her past and her present. Ms. Perkins, no matter if she stays in the church, or leaves it, has to relate to her history, her experiences and her emotional memories, her whole life.

I don’t know if the Baptist church Ms. Perkins attended was a bonafide fundamentalist church. It sounds conservative culturally, from what she says. But, remember, not all conservatives are fundamentalist. But her story is remarkably emblematic of many people in America...raised in a religious home, but not quite at home within it. Like the original Pilgrims, many of us leave that familiar home religion, and venture forth. Some find other religions; some give up religion as much as they can. Some leave Christianity. Some go deeper into its more conservative branches. Some born and raised Unitarian Universalists don’t leave the tradition, but do deepen their theology any number of ways. To be authentically religious is to grow and change and deepen.

But the point is, there are many millions here in the nation of religious pilgrims who have left fundamentalist congregations, too, of whatever denominations. I want to be clear here... fundamentalism, like revivalism, has no church of its own. There is no such thing as First Fundamentalist Church. Fundamentalism is a movement across denominational lines. By the same token, we aren’t the only religious liberals there are, either.

And when I look at the modern face of America, I see how clearly the fundamentalist approach has made its mark on our culture, and our ways of moving through the world. You see, even when some fundamentalists leave their religion...many do...for secularism, or atheism or some liberal church, or Buddhist group...the **structures** of fundamentalism often come with them. They may leave Christ and Atonement and the Last Judgement behind, but the “simple contrasts” reflected so clearly in revivalist hymnody, are the sort of structure that remains. Remember what Dr. Marsden said?

joy and sorrow, turmoil and rest, weakness and strength, darkness and light, defeat and victory, purity and impurity, guilt and forgiveness, the saved and the lost. In this world-view, he continues, ambiguity was rare. Transitions never occurred gradually, but were, like the conversion experience itself, radical transformations from one condition to its opposite.

Binary thinking, I call it. Either/or thinking. And our secular culture is filled with fundamentalist structure, often without any religious content whatsoever. Are you part of a Red or Blue state? Are you progressive? Then your foes must all be right-wing nuts! Racist and what? Not racist? Feminist? No, Rush Limbaugh’s “Femi Nazi.” Either you are pro-war or you are a traitor. Either you believe in a God who works miracles, or you must be an atheist. Either you are an atheist, or you must be a fundamentalist. Or worse, a wishy-washy moderate. Either you’re a Haliburton-supporting capitalist, or you must be one of them socialists, like they have in France. Either you are pro-Gay marriage or you are the new Fred Phelps. Either you are gay or straight...bisexuals, I just read the other day in a local gay publication, really don’t exist and are just deceiving themselves. And there is, the article asserts, a study that *proves* it! Ah, those *inerrant* studies, just like those *inerrant* bible passages on the tracts stuck in my car door! I read this book which changed my life...it answers everything. I take this supplement which changed my life. I found

this exercise machine they sell on television that will give me 8-pack abs in just two weeks, and I don't have to diet or anything. No slow transition... sudden conversion. I used to be...and now I am...because I found...

All of this is fundamentalist language. It has permeated our culture, even among those, like me, not raised in such culture. My point this morning is this. Either/or approaches to life are dangerous and deceptive. There are almost always many ways to frame things. The complexity of human lives in a complex environment with a 4 billion year complex evolution must not be frozen into the modern intellectual ice-cube tray I find all around me: Either this, or that. Either you are with me a hundred percent, or you are against me.

What I am doing this morning is asking us all to be on the alert for how unconscious structures, seeping into our lives via a uniquely powerful movement in American history, can sometimes subdue and replace our thoughts and feelings unconsciously, dampening our capacity to live a free, spiritually well-grounded life, a life that that flows instead of freezes, heals instead of harms.

American history, itself, is far wider than the fundamentalist claim that this is a "Christian" nation. The dollar bill you may still have in your hand reminds you that many of our forebears were skeptical deists, not proto-fundamentalists. And frankly, the idea of a *Novo Ordo Saeculorum*, a new order for the ages, on our bills, is not a bad one. An revolutionary order based not on either/or, but on both/and, based on respect for differences, based on understanding and serious compassion. What would happen if we took that idea seriously, and recognized that, in a world of ethnic rivalry, religious conflict, political corruption, sexual oppression and systemic poverty, our nation, with its unique history, so multi-cultural, multi-faith, so skeptical, so very complex in its struggles, might, if we claimed our deeper heritage, have something better, more redemptive, to offer the world than what we offer...and even impose upon it... now?

Offertory

Our strength is a common strength.
Our joy is a shared joy.
Our responsibilities are joined together.
We give of our hours to the common endeavor.
We give of our heart to the common endeavor.
We give of our livelihoods to the common endeavor.
We give because our strength is a common strength,
our joy is a shared joy,
our responsibilities are real,
and are joined together.

Prayer of Encouragement: Following the Path

Let's follow those who lead us well,
and that we in turn might learn how to better lead.
Let's follow those who always question hurt and harm, and help to answer their anguish by offering our healing.
Let's follow those who turn away from
humiliation or violence, and call them heroes and *sheroes*, not cowards.

Let's follow the paths of those who braved trails before us, that we may learn, not their paths,
but how to brave trails of our own.

Let's follow the path of the wise,
whom we recognize because they never claim to be wise, and never, ever bully.

Let's follow those who laugh, who weep,
who dance, who play, who struggle, who refuse to shame, who refuse to demean, so that we can
remember what it means to be truly and most honorably human.

Oh Love, be our guiding star and our compass as we follow on.