

Kick the Darkness 'Til It Bleeds Daylight

Ken Sehested

John 1:1-14

Sunday, January 3, 2010

Merry Christmas! And yes, it's still Christmas, though the grocery stores are already pulling out Valentine's Day candy displays. I hope you got some treasured gifts. I got two special ones: the first, a framed print with the enlarged artwork from the cover of my new book of litanies. (Ask me to show it to you next time you're at our house.) The other special gift, from my good friend Mark Siler, is this singing pickle. (And, no, you can't play with it next time you come to our house.)

And Happy New Year! Thanks to good Pope Gregory, who reformed our calendar in the 16th century, many of us remained awake to hear the fireworks on Thursday evening. 2010 sounds like an awfully big number, but for Jews, the year is 5800. All told, there are 43 different calendars in use today, somewhere in the world. The question of when the calendar should turn a page is not terribly important. But it is important to have regular times of recollecting the past, which is often what we do as one year ends and another begins. Because to know where you're going, you need to be clear about where you've been.

The year 2009 was significant for us. We carried \$12,000 to our partner church in Cuba last year—a hefty sum, even for us, and a genuine miracle for our friends at Iglesia Getsémani. A group of parents organized and led a very ambitious “Our Whole Lives” training in healthy sexuality for our children. And a number of our adults, led by Kiran Sigmon, underwent training in how to provide a safe environment here in our congregation for our children—a process that led to a set of policy guidelines to implement our convictions.

This past year we performed our first ordination service. We commissioned three of our college students for new life adventures; and the Walker Wilsons for their 3-year assignment in Colombia; and others for major life changes. We helped give birth to a new congregation, Land of the Sky United Church of Christ. (You may not know that your pastors have served as consultants to three other new congregations. I never would have imagined being a “church planter.”)

We didn't directly bail Greg Yost out of prison for his action against mountaintop-removal coal mining, but we did help him shoulder his fine. A new “Pursuing Peace” mission group was formed last year. The first fruits of its work took shape in the “Peace Pilgrimage” fund to support our young people's faith journeys.

And in the near future, we will begin focused discussion on the other proposal from this mission group, on what it might mean for us to declare ourselves a “peace church.” I think this discussion will be very important to clarify what we mean by “peace.” Because one of our nation's most feared military weapons—the MX missile—was dubbed “the peacemaker” by a former president. Everybody wants peace; the problem is that we also want what we cannot get without war.

Maybe the most unusual thing we did in 2009 was approve a budget for 2010 that is nearly 20% higher than 2009's budget. We now know we'll need to trim that a bit, and later this month the Church Council will offer to you several options for lowering this year's budget. But given the state of our economy, the fact that we made this leap is testimony to our capacity to take tangible risks on behalf of our convictions.

And that fact is the one constant in our common life. Our worship style is always open for changes; the direction of our mission projects vary from year to year. What stays the same is an ever-present longing and commitment to deepen our spiritual lives and find creative ways for these commitments to be expressed in the world. Week after week—and, with God's grace, before long we will be able to say “decade after decade”—we dig deeper and deeper into the meaning of our calling as people who believe that the world that is given is not the world that is promised. Month by month, we do the creative work of figuring out how to best shape our common life, how to spend our time and financial assets—together as a community and as individuals and families—to offer proper praise to God as we invest in efforts to heal the world. The exuberant work of praise to God is the basis for confounding fear's dominion.

Week after week, we dig deeper and deeper into the meaning of our calling as people who believe that the world that is given is not the world that is promised.

Year in and year out, we return to our vision and mission statement: Repeat it with me:
We are followers of Jesus who believe that doing justice and loving mercy are intimately tied to walking humbly with God. Our mission is to nurture spiritual formation in ways that support prophetic and redemptive work in the world.

I confess that in recent years I've grown weary of one of the popular pieties in our culture. You've probably heard someone say, "I'm a spiritual person, but I'm not religious." I think I know what they mean. The history of every religion, including Christianity, is overflowing with brutalities done in the name of one god or another.

But I get uneasy when someone claims to be "spiritual" but not "religious." It sounds a little bit like saying, "I'm a musician, but I don't play any particular instrument." Or "I'm an athlete, but of no particular sport."

I can't help thinking of another other popular phrase—"hooking up"—as an expression of sexual intimacy. "Hooking up" is just another variant of "shopping spree," which is another variant of "turning on" with chemical substance abuse, which is another variant of "saddling up" for military adventurism. All of these are forms of consumerism that reflect the disorientation of the herd and the ache of beggarly souls who have no clue that the only life worthy living is shared life, characterized by loving neighbors, and even enemies.

The "Home and Garden" section of the *Asheville Citizen-Times* gave me a good image of what being "spiritual but not religious" has come to mean. Each week there's a different home—almost always a luxury home—featured on the front page of that section. Here's how a recent one in Walnut Cove, a gated community east of Asheville, was described: "The home is on a 1.48-acre lot with a stream in the back. The wooded lot and acreage offer a glimpse of wildlife and a serene outdoors experience." Quoting the homeowners, "Asheville is such a terrific city. But you're totally removed [here], just ten minutes away from downtown—it's the best of all worlds. There's a lot of interesting cultural ideas and the whole artistic and music scene. . ."

The "best of both worlds" means freedom without responsibility. Which is no freedom at all, but is in fact a form of slavery to whatever cultural, political, or economic "market forces" are currently dominant. The "best of both worlds" in this case is nothing more than a form of voyeurism: titillation without relationship, the ordering of all of life around an impoverished little ego.

Just a "glimpse" of wildlife, with the "outdoors" functioning as a private experience. You live close enough to the "interesting cultural ideas" without having to pay the cost or negotiate the burden of creating a livable city. Spiritual. But not religious. Sentiment. But not substance. It reminds me of one of the Apostle Paul's statements about people who "have the form of religion, but not the power" (2 Timothy 3:5).

"Spiritual formation" is not a tourist experience. You have to make and keep commitments. As someone has said, "'Spirituality' does not make hospice calls." Caring for the wounded, the broken, the dying involves more than weekend adventures. To borrow a phrase from musician Bruce Cockburn, our job is to "Kick the Darkness 'Til It Bleeds Daylight."

The text for today is that well-known passage in the first chapter of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . ." This text has echoes of the prophet Isaiah's poetry about "the light shining in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." And then that most distinctive of Christian statements: "The Word became flesh."

It's easy to see that these opening lines from John's Gospel are a restatement of the creation story from Genesis. The author's purpose is a powerful reaffirmation of the goodness of creation and a reassertion of God's promise to one day reclaim the world from its bondage to sin and violence.

In counseling, therapists often spend a lot of time exploring a client's "family of origin." Because in fact we are all shaped in profound ways—and often in ways we fail to recognize—by our family's story and dynamic. So John is saying, "Remember who you are! You were formed in mercy, and justice is your inheritance. Fleshly life is not different from spiritual life. Spiritual life is fleshly life lived according to certain values and purposes. And it is fleshly life—not some disembodied, ethereal 'spirit'—that is destined to be redeemed."

But the text warns that the world as presently arranged "does not know him"—does know Jesus, the Word of God. And by extension, the world will not know those who follow Jesus—something which

Jesus himself repeatedly told his disciples. Which is to say, the journey of following Jesus will somehow, sometime involve conflict.

That's why we remain prepared to bail folk out of jail. That's why we add our weight to pressing our City Council to pay living wages. That's why we have special rituals to encourage our young people (and sometimes our old people) to dream new dreams and take risks for the sake of their faith.

That's why we're willing to break the law by sending funds to support the life of brothers and sisters in Camagüey, Cuba. That's why we support each other in our commitments to care tenderly for sick relatives and friends; to seek work that is meaningful, even if it's not well-paying; or to forego paid employment in order to nurture our children; or to speak up at work, to cause a fuss and maybe risk our own jobs, when co-workers are not treated fairly.

This journey of following Jesus means, as Dale Roberts said so eloquently back in the fall, that this community of faith will not just tolerate Jody [his son with Down Syndrome]—and not just welcome him—but will affirm him. Jody, in the world to come, I imagine you conducting the Mormon Tabernacle Choir—when you're not busy with starring roles in Italy's largest opera houses.

The range of potential conflicts—conflicts between the way the world is and the way we believe it will be—is wide and deep. And we constantly make calculated choices, as a community and as individuals, on where to assert the small weight of our convictions.

In one of my several readings of today's text, I remembered a cartoon from many years ago. Two monks are in a dark monastery hallway. One of them lights a candle. The other one says, "Frankly, I find it more emotionally satisfying to curse the darkness."

That is always a temptation for us: to simply curse the darkness rather than light one teeny-tiny candle. The darkness often feels overwhelming. There's more than enough darkness to keep a boatload of cussing sailors busy. And our candles seem so inadequate.

This is not to belittle our laments, our darkness-cursing. This, too, is part of our worship. We not only allow but encourage bringing to speech the ways in which life gets tossed and tangled and broken and bruised.

The Jewish soil from which our faith grows has a rich and vivid tradition of arguing with God about life's crushing conditions. Ironically, the willingness to express our pain and despair is an indication that hope is still alive. If there were no hope, however muted, there would be no grounds for complaint. Only the silent are truly hopeless.

But candle-lighting will continue to be the primal impulse of our journey. "Be joyful," Wendell Berry once wrote, "even though you've considered all the facts."

Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God," said Fr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. And it is the pursuit of joy that drives us. Not happiness, not stock market rallies or wars on terror, not even scenic views or tourist experiences or whatever "spiritual" program is the current flavor of the month. It is the pursuit of joy that orders us and directs us and occupies us.

It is the nature of this joy that allows us to take risks with our personal lives for the sake of the Word of God, for the One who knows our grief and yet promises that one day all tears will be dried. Our capacity to risk is always proportionate to our capacity for reverence. And we revere the One who became flesh, who lived among us, for we have seen God's glory, full of grace, full of truth.

Amen.