

The Christmas Story Is Always Happening



The Christmas story as found in Luke and Matthew's gospel never happened, yet it is still happening. This is the mystery and power of myth. Neither Mark or John bother with a birth narrative. Mind you, John sets Jesus' life within the context of a

creation story. "In the beginning was the Word..." It shouldn't really be a faith-buster to realize that Luke and Matthew's birth stories differ on a great many details. Nor should we be anxiously trying to harmonize them—although this makes for great entertainment in most Christmas pageants.

What's still happening? Right from the start we are reminded that nothing is possible without the words that have been immortalized in Mary's response to the angel's announcement. "Let it be to me according to your word". This holy "yes" is the way that new futures still come into being. We don't discover the deep purpose of our lives until we allow our soul to break through the fear that is our egoic personality structure, with those same words. And then, we become with Mary, responsible for the future that needs us in order to emerge. It all begins with consent to the good news that the best is yet to come, and it's coming through us and all willing souls.

What's still happening? Well, women like Mary are still doing an end-run around patriarchy, giving birth to a new humanity. In the words of Canadian singer-songwriter, "Mary has a child without the help of a man". I think here of Malala Yousafzai, the youngest woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize for standing up to the Taliban around the rights of education for Pakistani

girls. She was shot in the head by these evil men, but survived, and hers was the first voice I heard speaking out against the Taliban's slaughter of 142 innocent school children this past week. The man who did help Mary, Joseph, also defied patriarchal and sexist norms in conspiring to give birth to the Christ child.

ISIS, along with the Syrian regime, would make it to the top of my list for those contemporary men who embody Herod energy in the story, the archetype of twisted masculine energy, willing to execute children at the altar of Empire, (or in this case, religious ideology). That energy lives today, and only the most naive and innocent of spiritual expressions deny the existence of evil. Of course, Herod also lives within each one of us, threatened by the emergence of new life (Christ archetype). There is part of us that would rather destroy the nascent life within than die to the personality structure and give birth to the new.

What else is still happening that this Christmas myth captures? Well, I love the part about the Magi, the Zoroastrian star-gazers who spend their lives in contemplation. This occupation, this preoccupation, is so subversive today, in a global society that cannot see much further than economic policy. We have no time to gaze at stars while there is money to be made and endless amounts of work to be done.



Our myopia is thrown into stark relief by the Magi, who intuit that the movement of the stars hold the secret to our future. They are not cynics. They are not materialists. They feel that the cosmos itself is impregnated with meaning and purpose, that it's going somewhere, that it's *for us* somehow. How much richer this is than the Herodian orthodoxy of materialism bent on reducing the world to physical processes, and in the

process voiding the universe of deep, intrinsic purpose.

While we're on the Magi, there's is a spiritual orientation worth replicating. First, note that they come to pay homage to the Christ child, laden with gifts. Unlike, fundamentalist Christians, who make the journey to foreign lands intent only on converting the natives to their version of religion, the Magi come purely in a spirit of devotion. They recognize that something of cosmic import is about to happen in this birth. They leave their gifts, and critically outfox Herod. They are wise men, after all, who know the ways of the world, know how the dominant order works, and have lost all interest in whatever that order has to offer them by way of bribes and favours. The story says that they "returned home *another way*". Metaphorically speaking, despite having their own belief systems and spiritual practice, (which didn't change – there was no "conversion") they were open enough to be changed through their devotion.



And while we're on the topic of the Bethlehem birth, I also love that it is cosmological in scope. The star points the way, and the star stands still over

the stable. To my mind this describes what cosmologist, Brian Swimme, calls the power of centration. The Whole con-centrates itself in this birth. A single star, representing the trillions of galaxies, is present reminding us what the writers of the myth could not have known, that we were given life by those stars, and that what is happening in the stable is the concentration of all the heavy elements that were born in a star's death. The cosmos participates in this legend of the birth of a Messiah. This is, we now know, not merely romantic. The evolutionary worldview reminds us that it takes a whole cosmos to produce a Jesus of Nazareth, and by immortalizing this story in sacred myth, we can contemplate this mystery annually.

What's still happening which the Christmas story captures? The Christ is still being born through willing souls, willing to subvert the dominant order, the insanity of inhumane living—what life looks like alienated from natural intelligence and allegiance to the deepest evolutionary currents of a Spirit-soaked universe.

Surrender to Grace

[Surrender to Grace-web](#) from [Bruce Sanguin](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Two Baptisms, A Global Transformation

John doesn't mince words.



“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

3:8 Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

It’s not one’s ancestry, it’s not about one’s beliefs, it’s not about one’s grand philosophical system. None of these things will save us “from the wrath that is to come”. I’m not sure what the wrath is that John is referring to, but it has something to do with the inevitability of more violence and more misery unless we change our ways—that is, repent.

John’s baptism apparently is a *response* to a changed heart, a sign that you have already had a change of heart. It’s not a *means* of grace. It’s not an spiritual insurance plan. Those who have come to be baptized ask the next logical question. “What must we *do*?” Again, not what must we believe. Not, what must we think. Rather what’s the action that is being asked of me.

It’s simple and yet for some reason eludes us in the 21st century. Share so that nobody goes without. Stop being greedy. Quit making money unethically. Treat people like human beings who are made in the image of G_d. I was watching a documentary called Human. An Australian aboriginal noted that in his ancestral language there is no word for “please” and “thank you”. It’s just assumed that those without have a right to receive from the community if they are in need. Why would you need a name for this exchange? It’s inconceivable that a few would have more than their share when there were others that had nothing.

To the tax collectors, who made their profit by charging above the Roman quota they were given, John directs them to be fair. No gouging.

To the Roman soldiers, who used threats of violence and the capacity to falsely accuse in order to blackmail, John says, stop it.

These actions reflect the darkness that sets in when we live with the illusion that we are separate from, and therefore in competition with, other humans. The darkness set in right about the time Empires got the idea that they should monopolize local cultures, decimating village life and a more indigenous sensibility portrayed by the story of the aboriginal above. This is probably why Jesus fought so hard to restore community after Rome entered and tried to turn Palestine into a mini-Rome, a mono-phony of civic life. Fast forward a couple thousand years, add industrialization and neo-liberal capitalism to the mix, the globalization of the golden arches and you have the decimation of community with the rise of individualism, (along with McD.'s 1/4 pounder in Paris).

John comes along with his ancestral memory of a time when humans naturally took care of each other. I don't want to romanticize this – even in indigenous communities there was inter-tribal warfare, but at least within a tribe it was unthinkable that an individual would go without. He sees the breakdown of human society and calls them to ethical repentance.

I guess this was quite radical, because his call to behave properly causes some to think that he must be the Messiah. But he says no, one is coming who will baptize, not just with water, but with "fire"! There is a baptism of water, for the forgiveness of sins. And there is this other baptism, that is aimed at burning away all the cultural, historical, personal trauma that causes one to believe that we are so separate from each other that we can just stop taking care of each other.

This illusion of separation requires strong medicine to overcome. Especially in contemporary Western society. We value

privacy and independence above all else, even though it's making us miserable and lonely. We don't always recognize our misery or loneliness though. It just feels like a soul-sickness. We know that something is wrong. But it seems to be the only game in town.

To receive the baptism of the Nazarene is to have all of this separation, born of trauma, burned away. It doesn't mean that we can't enjoy solitude. Our souls long for solitude. But when solitude is not contained by a community that shares, that looks out for one another, that does life together, does ceremony, honours the ancestors, mentors the young, gives back to Earth, it becomes soul-crushing loneliness.

John's baptism is a behavioral correction. It's critical when we're lost to hear a clear voice saying Stop It. This is no way to live. It's an outside-in shift. The baptism of Jesus is an perceptual and perspectival correction. It's a corrective to how we see reality. It's an inside-out shift. Both baptisms are necessary and complimentary. The baptism by fire is more permanent because everything that is not love is burned away, and all you are left with is compassion for self and other.

The church needs both baptisms. What the church does so well is respond to John's call to do the right thing. The executive secretary of B.C. conference of the United Church of Canada wrote that over 1/2 of the UCC churches in British Columbia is sponsoring a Syrian refugee family. It made be proud to still be associated with the church. The baptism of Jesus is also necessary, because we can't just go back home to our private silos and live by the ethics of this capitalist system, and then come to church and respond to the next crisis. At some point, we have to get purged by the refiner's fire, and challenge the system itself. Because our souls know from the inside-out that we are one with G_d, with Earth, and with each other.

Luke 3:7-18

3:7 John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

3:8 Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

3:9 Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

3:10 And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?"

3:11 In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."

3:12 Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?"

3:13 He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."

3:14 Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

3:15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,

3:16 John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not

worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

3:17 His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

3:18 So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

The G_d Cycle and the Kingdom of G_d

The Kingdom of G_d was Jesus' core message. In progressive Christian circles it is widely interpreted, thanks to modern scholarship and the brilliance of John Dominic Crossan as a subversive political metaphor. Caesar's Kingdom, his domination system, peace through violence is replaced by peace through justice, embodied in Jesus. I agree with this and I have written about it myself.



My only concern is that it becomes too easy to turn the KG into our favourite political ideology. There are political implications, absolutely, of orienting from this realm. But the KG is primarily a *way of seeing and experiencing reality. It is actual. Not a metaphor.* When we see reality clearly we stand a far greater chance of acting in congruence with this vision.

The KG is always, already present. But we can only experience it, phenomenologically, in a deep state of relaxation. That is, when we feel safe and secure. When we feel this, we naturally trust. Trust is the precondition of surrender. And surrender is the key that opens the door to the KG. This is the G_d Cycle.

My experience is that this feeling of deep and profound safety is rare in our culture. Our adrenal systems are on high alert, stoked by caffeine and numbed by alcohol, and various other addictions. We live in a condition of personal, historical, and cultural trauma. This is the Matrix, which is a condition of the wounded feminine, which has been traumatized by the failed masculine of patriarchy. The feminine has been degraded, denigrated, and traumatized for literally thousands of years by the domination system of patriarchy. This trauma gets passed down generation after generation. It is insidious, the air we breathe. We end up literally not knowing that we live in the Matrix. To say we are "wired" captures it very aptly. This gets at the technological dimension of contemporary life, which tips over into and reflects a dehumanization. This technopoly not only contributes to the overtaxing of our cortisol system, it is a reflection of the state of the world soul.

We are not relaxed enough to see and experience what Jesus called the Kingdom of God. When Jesus taught that the pure of heart are blessed because only the pure of heart can see G_d he meant this, I believe, on all levels—purity at physical, emotional, mental levels. When we purify at these levels, a natural spiritual vision comes on line. This is why every serious spiritual path is marked by purgation—being released from, and participating in the release of all influences that make us impure. It requires strong medicine. Church, which has been co-opted by the Matrix, has stopped delivering on the potential to truly transcend this world (be in the world but not of it). The medicine has been watered down, in my opinion.

Impurity manifests as any habit, substance, or way of being that prevents the G_d Cycle from being realized in our lives.

Physical impurity is caused today by eating processed foods, too much sugar, fat, and salt, overconsumption of alcohol, caffeine, and recreational drugs. These substances are often introduced as a strategy for making us feel safe. They fill the void temporarily. Thereby we teach our bodies that we need these substances, and our bodies naturally call for them in desperation. This creates anxiety, and the cycle continues.

Mental impurity is caused by our own mental activity. Our thoughts and beliefs mostly operate outside of our conscious control. What we often don't realize is that negative thought processes (such as cynicism, pessimism, excessive doubt, critical judgement of self and others, sarcasm are energetic systems that actually create a condition of darkness within us, which we then project on to the world, and then see only darkness – not realizing that much of the darkness is self-generated. When our minds are in control they are in service to trauma and keep us in a karmic loop. We cannot enter the cycle of relaxation, trust, surrender. In fact, the explicit mandate of all our mental activity is to keep us from this cycle.

Emotional impurity is caused by unintegrated trauma, from an early age, war experiences, etc. Early trauma, which is always a failure of love, gives rise to our personalities as elaborate compensation systems. The compensation system usually breaks down in situations of deep intimacy, when the stakes are high enough and we're being invited to a condition of trusting the other. This invitation, in all its various forms, is profoundly, but unconsciously threatening to the personality system. It brings us shame, rage, desperation, loneliness – all the feelings we did not know what to do with and there was no space for in our earliest years. To open to love later in life is inevitably to be triggered by those earlier failures of love. This is why so few marriages are

thriving. We either make a deep, courageous commitment to becoming conscious – which is the gift of intimacy – or we unconsciously recapitulate all the trauma. In the vernacular this becomes a shit-show. Again, without integrating this emotional trauma the G_d Cycle of relaxation, trust, surrender, is not possible.

All these systems need to be cleansed in order to “enter the KG” as Jesus put it. Ever noticed how Jesus associated entering the KG with releasing? Attachment to wealth, one’s own family, even your own life? This is because all of these easily become sources of addiction, what we use to keep us from the “narrow path” of purifying our lives. If money, family, and your own life are dedicated to the perpetuation of the Matrix, what Jesus called “this world” to distinguish it from the True World or G_d’s world, then they need to be purged from our lives before we can enter the KG.

What is the KG like? My experience is that it is characterized by clear-seeing (clairvoyance). You see through the Matrix. You see all the suffering. You see the source of the suffering. When Jesus said “my Kingdom is not of this world”, it’s truly not. We are called to be fully “in” this world, but not “of” it.

It is characterized by deep compassion. You feel all the suffering caused by the refusal to walk the path of the pure-hearted. You feel all the trauma. Your heart expands to hold it all, but it’s all held in a love that is Ultimate.

It is eternal. You feel that this condition of Love is the true Matrix, it is the Mother that births universes. It is the womb from which all emerges. It holds all, including evil, suffering, and violence. It is always, already present waiting for us to enter at any moment.

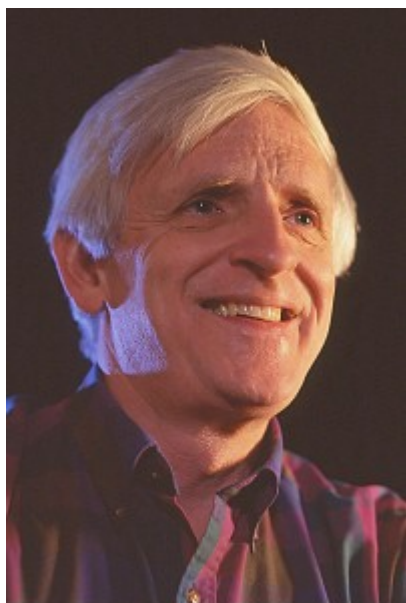
It is joyful. You see and feel all the beauty. There is nothing more beautiful than witnessing a courageous soul

release their fear and return to a condition of trust. Nothing.

It is strengthening. You feel your inner warrior rise up. You are initiated into the order of the pure hearted, and it is your mission to defend this order, both within yourself and in the world. The warrior sees clearly the difference between right and wrong, good and evil, dark and light, and he wields his/sword in defence of the KG. "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34).

It is, as Jesus said, "very near". It is as close, in truth, as the present moment. It is Presence. The challenge is that only the pure of heart can be present. We mostly live in time because of the above trauma. We live in and out of the past. Or we are ruminating about the future. But it's all here. Right now. As close as our breath. As a pure breath, without distraction.

Matthew Fox's Autobiography: The Making of A Post- Denominational Priest



When I was in the second year of seminary, word got back to my systematic theology professor that I had shared my statement of faith at a meeting of Presbytery, and that it contained a lot of “creation-centered” spirituality. One morning I got word that the good professor wished an audience with me. I walked up four flights of stairs to his office where I found him sitting behind his large oak desk, smoking his pipe, and reading my statement of faith. He looked up at me and solemnly pronounced that if I continued down this road I would never make it to seminary because I would be constantly stopping in front of every tree and bowing before it! I told him that if it was a choice between being in a devotional relationship with a tree and being part of a society that saw them as nothing more than “resources” for human consumption, I would happily bow before every tree.

Emmanuel college had been infiltrated by the Rev. Dr. Matthew Fox, and the neo-Barthians were not impressed or pleased. By the time of my mini-inquisition I had read a couple of this heretic’s books, namely, *Whee! We, Wee, All the Way Home* and *On Becoming a Musical Mystical Bear*. Because of these books, and Matthew Fox’s mentorship I had made the shift from a redemption-centered paradigm to a creation-centered paradigm. And everything changed.

When Matthew’s people invited me to blog about his new, revised autobiography, *Confessions: The Making of a Post-Denominational Priest*, I felt honoured and called to do so. My own confession is that I’ve only read 300 of this over 500 page book. But I found those three hundred pages extremely interesting. To read the story of Matthew Fox is to track the major cultural events of the world from the 1960’s to the present day. Such is his commitment to the necessity of

cultural engagement, and his deep sense that culture – the arts, science, the humanities, and the major events of our lives are the arena of Spirit.

His is a ministry of prophetic engagement, but engagement that is grounded in the mystical. Not the mysticism of a neo-Platonic Hellenistic dualism, but one that is more grounded in Judaism and the mysticism of Meister Eckhart and Hildegard of Bingen. I invited Matthew to speak at the church where I was the lead minister in Vancouver on three different occasions. As well, a small team of people, led by a woman who had taken a master's course in creation spirituality from Matthew's university, ICCS, brought the Cosmic Mass to Vancouver. I was privileged to be part of the planning team for this radical ("getting to the roots") form of liturgy, as we moved through Fox's four ways of Positiva, Negative, Creativa, and Transformativa.

I confess that while I had always known Matthew's deep commitment to justice based in a spirituality of compassion, I was always less certain about his mysticism, his felt sense of the presence of G_d in his life. His autobiography was so refreshing to me because he tells the story of his deep spiritual yearning for G_d, and his sense of how the numinous animated his life. This is from his personal journal:

I am convinced that my greatest mistake all my life long has been in not trusting God enough. This trip, with its possibly portentous outcome, has taught me this trust. I now know that Christ, who brought me here, loves each of us personally and watches all we do and hears all we wish for. Oh God! Give yourself to souls. It is all people wish for!

I learned about his out-of-body experience, observing himself speaking from a chandelier in the ceiling, during a lecture. And how, during his year of being silenced by Rome, he found himself in an indigenous sit-out/vision quest, experiencing

visions of animals, masks, saints, and learning in his bones that was not not alone in his suffering. I enjoyed hearing about Matthew's piety. To be honest, when I had listened to Matthew speak, it was mostly his passion for justice mixed with an understandable smattering of bitterness at the systemic intransigence and collusion in evil of the institutional church. But he allows us to see this deep well of spirit in this autobiography.

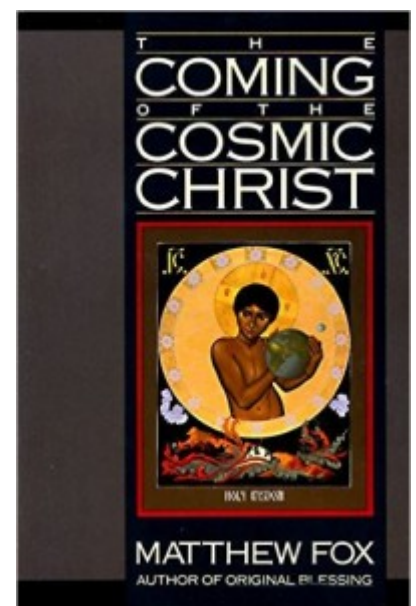
A short list of stuff I didn't know

There are many things I did not know about Matthew including: Hugh Hefner, (yes of the Playboy Empire) invited him to lunch, complete with Playboy bunnies) after reading a piece Matthew wrote about the trivialization of sex in American culture. Hefner loved it and reprinted the article; I didn't know that Matthew received the idea of the distinction between creation-spirituality and redemption-centered spirituality from one of his professors when he was studying in Paris, a man named Chenu.

Chenu named the two spiritual traditions: that of "fall/redemption" and that of "creation-centered spirituality." Scales fell from my eyes; I was bumped from my horse! The most pressing question I had brought with me to Paris—how do mysticism and social justice relate (if at all)?—now had a context! So did the issues of dualism and the demeaning of body and matter. Creation spirituality would bring it all together for me: the scriptural and Jewish spirituality (for it was the oldest tradition in the Bible, that of the Yahwist author of the ninth or tenth century before Christ); science and spirituality; politics and prayer; body and spirit; science and religion; Christianity and other world religions. It would be my task to study creation spirituality more deeply and to begin a cultural translation of it. This task would prove to be a process in its own right with unforeseen consequences.

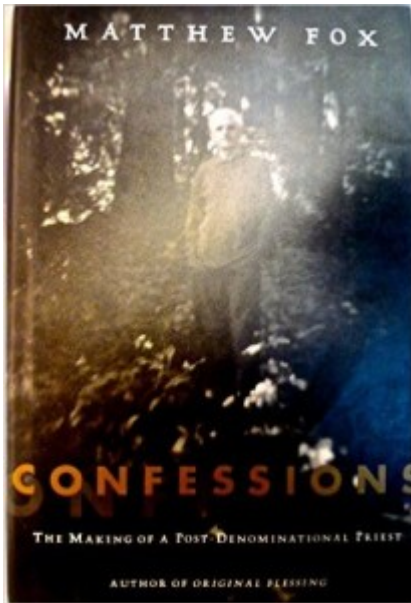
I didn't know that Thomas Merton exchanged letters with Matthew encouraging his interest in mystical theology and encouraging him to study in Paris; I didn't know the depths of Matthew's scholarship. He graduated with his Phd. from University in Paris with a "maxima" – the equivalent of a summa cum laude in North America. The last person to receive this distinction was theologian Karl Rahner 15 years previously; I didn't know that he was inspired by Abraham Lincoln at a very early age; I didn't know that reading Tolstoy's *War and Peace* was pivotal to his spiritual journey; I didn't know that he suffered from polio as a boy, or that he subsequently was a good athlete; I didn't know that he had a love relationship with his dog, Tristan, whom Matthew regarded as a wisdom teacher; I didn't know that he was in a serious car accident that left him in excruciating pain, until he found a holistic chiropractor.

Matthew was the first person to introduce me to the idea of the Cosmic Christ. At the time, I knew he got this right, but to be honest I didn't totally grock it. I was not surprised to hear of his early relationship with Dr. Brian Swimme, physicist and cosmologist, who is also one of my intellectual mentors. Brian too has a deep sense of the numinosity of the Great Story of the evolutionary process, and it is not a far theological step to appreciating that the Christ, who animated Jesus of Nazareth, is present in every atom and molecule. I was not surprised to learn that Teilhard de Chardin is one of Matthew's mentors, who more than anyone else (Teilhard) grasped the cosmic dimensions of the Christ story.



Like all true prophets, Matthew was silenced and then expelled from the Dominican Order. To read the background of the story is to feel righteous rage for the likes of Ratzinger, the

cardinal who headed up Rome's persecution of Fox, and deep disappointment in his order for reversing their support of him, and expelling him from the order. Their loss was the world's gain. And this is the story of the post-denominational mystic/prophet, Matthew Fox.



Matthew is a true Human, an exemplar of what the world can make us if we engage it with courage, conviction, piety, and profound compassion. The fact that he is still going strong is a gift to the world. I salute you, Matthew, honour you, and thank you for being the spiritual warrior that you are. [Get the book](#). It's a great trip through the mind and heart of a great man.

[Take Responsibility: Receive Freedom](#)

[Take Responsibility-web](#) from [Bruce Sanguin](#) on [Vimeo](#).

[Redemption Interview with Dr.](#)

Mia Kalef

I thought I'd share with you a conversation my partner, Dr. Mia Kalef, and I enjoyed this week. We recorded this in our living room and thought it might be worth sharing. The night before we were visiting friends, who were expecting a baby immanently. The little guy arrived the next day! The conversation circled around redemption and it's relationship to birth, of humans yes, but of the New Human more generally. We thought of Paul's image of the whole of creation in birth pangs, but that very pressure was the necessary prelude to a new order. This is the essence of all apocalyptic scenarios.



And, of course, Advent always begin with the “mini-apocalypse. The Christ event which is recorded in the New Testament is set down as an apocalyptic occurrence. In Jesus, the whole of creation, 13.8 billion years, is gathered up – the whole of creation “centrates” in him. By his presence, Light and Love incarnate, the darkness is revealed. And, as the author of John's gospel puts it, the darkness in the world could not receive him. The darkness does not want to be called out. Because those who dwell in darkness (in unconscious or conscious collusion with that which is anti-life—evil is live reversed—have only two choices. Repent of the darkness and turn to the light in devotion to the Source of All, or foster more darkness. This is the crisis of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, according to the gospels.

Herod is the personification of the forces within us that are attracted to darkness and refuse to repent. The only option for those whose darkness is being exposed by light (and who refuse to repent) is to rage, attack, and undermine the light,

which is the absolute sovereignty of Love. But the wise ones (Magi), are those who know the movement of the stars, follow the light of cosmological wisdom that points directly to the source of redemption.

The birth pangs of Mary are the birth pangs of the totality of creation, contracting in her, to give birth to the New Human. This is the story of redemption. But the story doesn't guarantee our redemption, by virtue of telling it over and over again every Advent/Christmas. It must become the pattern of our own lives. We must, with Mary, feel these contractions within us – the contractions that contain all the evil, all the violence, all the greed, all the fear of our species and all the fear that is running our own lives. Out of this willingness to see clearly, to come to consciousness of what is and what is coming, a New Human is born, the Christ child. This is the one we must birth from within if we are to be participants in the drama of redemption.

Here is [the audio of the conversation](#).

Blessed are the Pure of Heart



"Blessed are the pure of heart, for they will see God" (Matthew 5:8)

I have preached many sermons on the theme of Jesus challenging the purity codes of his own religion. That is, he challenged dietary laws, the rituals of hand-washing, the rules around touching others who were unclean, who you could eat with, etc. These were all externalized expressions of a deeper longing for purity. And Jesus said that they missed the point, which was a pure heart, an internal purity. When this exclusive focus on externals had the effect of masking the impure condition of the heart, Jesus called it out.

But I think that to the extent liberal Christians dismissed the category of purity/impurity as it relates to the spiritual journey we excluded a critical phenomenological religious sensibility: the loss of a pure heart is one of the most profound losses we can experience. This is because impurity, as it relates to the heart, cuts us off from our natural capacity to "see" God, as the beatitudes put it. Conversely, when our hearts are cleansed, this spiritual vision comes back on line.

I recently experienced, in my body, mind, and soul, the deep grief of my heart being stained by trauma in my life. Another way of saying this is that I lost my innocence. Not innocence as naivete, but rather innocence as the experience of being able to deeply trust that the universe is good, nourishing, and trustworthy. This left a stain on my soul. I could no longer relax and be carried by life. I developed a certain vigilance. I needed to be wary, always one eye out for danger. I was in danger of being taken from, fed on when I should have been nourished. Disgust enters the picture, a deep sense that something is very, very wrong. And with this, a profound, if unconscious sadness. This sadness would be buried because as a child it was too overwhelming to integrate. But the vigilance, the grief, and the sadness would operate from the unconscious in subtle and not so subtle ways. You might call this an existential fall from grace.

But it is not inevitable. In truth, it should not happen to

any of us. But it happens to the vast majority of us. And what is taken from us, along with the loss of innocence is our capacity to see God.

The work of the spiritual journey is primarily regaining this lost purity. This requires much grief – grief as spiritual practice. It demands a facing of the disgust, and an expulsion of the poison that has lodged itself at a cellular level. It is literally nauseating to face this. The recovering of our lost purity demands that we bring to light all the darkness, all the darkness, all the trauma, all the deep disappointment that we were not loved unconditionally, that in truth we were taken from. This being taken from issues in the felt sense that life is too much for us to bear, we carry too much responsibility, because we did when we didn't know what to do with it.

This is shadow work, and it is virtually absent in the mainline, liberal Christianity as a practice. This is why there is typically so much conflict and so much wasted energy on interpersonal issues. The community becomes a cauldron of shadows unconsciously acting out pain, disappointment, failures of love. When trauma is not integrated consciously, we end up with drama, dramas that are re-enacted again and again. Nothing new actually happens. The furniture of our lives may change, but it is the same drama.

When I think of the misery that ISIS is enacting upon the world in the name of religious purity I get very sad. These young men are being ideologically brainwashed to believe that everybody else who does not believe as they believe are impure. As such, these unwashed deserve to die as divine punishment for impurity. But this is the kind of purity that Jesus warned against. Their violence is their own unconscious grief at having lost their impurity. But they cannot own it, or rather, they choose not to own it because it is too painful. It becomes their shadow, and it is projected onto the rest of the world. We – the others – become the great

unwashed, deserving of death. This is religious purity that is disconnected from love, precisely because to feel deep love is impossible without feeling the loss of innocence, all the ways that love has failed them in the past, and then consciously reintegrating this suffering into our lives.

The pure of heart see God, because, cleansed of the violence and the poison that was enacted against them, they feel love—for themselves and for others. This directly felt experience of love is the feeling of being one with all, including God. And when the pure of heart look out at the world, it is God looking through their eyes, and they feel it. This is not theology. This is the actual experience of recovered innocence, of a heart that is wide-open, surrendered in trust to life and to Spirit, in deep reverence for all that is arising moment by moment. It is the direct experience of beauty, because God is beauty itself. It is the experience of weeping in the presence of such beauty, and of a deep longing to somehow help all those who are suffering to know how loved they are, and that is okay, it's okay just to be your true self, before the trauma stole their vision.

I feel like the church should stop everything else and simply focus on helping people to find their pure heart. We devote massive resources to almost everything, but this one thing could be a game changer. It could give the church back its fundamental footing, the ground from which all else arises, and that is the capacity to see God.

The Righteous Branch



Jeremiah prophesies about the emergence of “the righteous branch”. Most liberal Christians get a little twitchy about the word “righteous” because it can be interpreted as holier-than-thou. And yes, a certain expression of righteousness is off-putting. Jesus warns against

the righteousness of the Pharisees, for example—an outward expression of piety, public exhibitions of holiness, which come from the ego, and not the Kingdom of G_d.

But the righteous “branch” by definition is connected to the vine, or the Source. It is the part of the plant that will ultimately bear fruit, precisely because of this connection. And as the author of John’s gospel puts it, any branch that is not connected to the vine will be ultimately discarded – thrown in the fire. Not because of divine wrath, but because it is dead. This is the only “wrath” we experience coming from G_d, the hell of being disconnected from the Source of Life.

In truth, the world as we know it currently is living in this hell. The Paris and Beirut massacres are a manifestation of the violence of the false righteousness that Jesus warned against. ISIS is not the Righteous Branch that Jeremiah is talking about. But it’s inevitable that all religion and religious language will be clumped together in the wake of this religious violence. Even the metaphor of a “righteous branch” will be held in deep suspicion. And no doubt, ISIS believes itself to be that holy branch.

But those who perpetuate this kind of violence are already living in hell and spreading hellish hatred. They are poisoned by ideology that comes from a disconnected mind –

disassociated from the reality that is Love. And we would be mistaken to assume that this hell is isolated in religious fanatics.

Truthfully, the whole human race is either connected to Love, the realm that Jesus called the Kingdom of G_d, or not. Or to clarify, we are always connected, but trauma, emotional, psychological, physical, spiritual, causes us to feel disconnected. And when we feel disconnected, our misery creates misery. We who are miserable, create the world in our image, a world of misery.

The world as we know it, our lives as we know them, must be purged of this trauma. There is so much poison that is infecting us at a cellular level that needs to come out. This is the death inside of us that must be excised. When it is, we drop quite naturally back into the world of G_d. We see that all is beautiful. And we see that there is nothing more beautiful than those souls who are doing the work of allowing the poison to be removed. It is not a pretty sight when viewed through the lens of ego. But this work of –let’s call it what it is–repentance, is seen as a beautiful offering when viewed from the world of G_d.

“Repent”, cried Jesus, “for the time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of G_d has drawn near. Repent, and believe in the good news (Mark 1:14, 15). Jesus picked up the mission of John the Baptist, who himself proclaimed and enacted a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (1:4). Liberal Christians have mistakenly downplayed or eliminated the need for repentance and the need for forgiveness of sin. Repentance is the key to entering the Kingdom of God.

What is meant by this is not that the Kingdom is some far off historical event that we are preparing for, but rather that is “very near”, very, very, near. It is like a veil, on the other side of which is the ever-present realm of Love. Truly, we can step through at any time. But only if we’ve done our work of

purging, of first seeing the poison that is infecting us, and allowing it to be removed. Then the veil is removed and we say to ourselves, astonished, "O G_d, you were always here."

The righteous branch consists of those people who have chosen to feel the pain of their trauma, to feel from within their own impurity. This is not an essential impurity, because we are manifestations of the consciousness of Love. But this Love has been stained. And the stain is truly sickening. Anybody who has not felt this and allowed for this "removal of sin" is not to be trusted. When we feel above this, we project our own impurity onto the world out there, and feel, not compassion but judgment. We deal with our disowned impurity (which is anything less than love) by obliterating the impurity we project on to others. We cast ourselves in the role of removing the impure from the face of the world – all in the name of righteousness. This is the fundamentalist mistake, and it looks like ISIS. It looks like all forms of religious fundamentalism.

But there truly is a Righteous Branch. It is formed by those who have looked within and seen how the power of darkness has ruled their life. It is formed of those souls who know that the path back to knowing this ever-present Love is the primary discipline of their life, and they are willing to face the profound grief of repentance. It is formed by those who have felt the depths of self-compassion for how much of their life has been lived disconnected from the vine, and the misery this has caused self and others. It is formed by those, who therefore, hold the broken, poisoned world, with the same compassion, and feel only love, only love for the world. It is formed by those who ask, as the work of their lives, to participate in the redemption of the trauma – not its perpetuation.

It is formed by those who inhabit and who are lived by this Love that Jesus called the Kingdom of G_d, and who know therefore that this Love will prevail. "The days are

surely coming when I will fulfill the promise” (Jeremiah 33:14). This Love actually does prevail. But it is awaiting fruition in the beautiful, broken world. The poison, the violence, the Empires that were built upon disconnection, will crumble and fall before this Love, because only this Love is actual. Those who know this and live it are the Righteous Branch.

Jeremiah 33:14-16

33:14 The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

33:15 In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

33:16 In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.”

Face Crisis As Opportunity

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