

A NEW DAY DAWNING

For the shape of this cosmos is passing away. — 1 Corinthians 7:31

Another member of our staff told us that when they woke up Wednesday morning their spouse said, “Welcome to the New Era!” As you know, following the inauguration of the 44th president of these United States, that sentiment has been repeated more than once. Many feel that this represents A New Day Dawning.

I suppose that would be true, at least to some extent, if the electoral process had turned out differently, if the person taking the oath of office last Tuesday had been Senator McCain, or Senator Clinton, or Governor Romney, or any of the other well qualified candidates. But I am sure we would all agree that the symbolic weight of Senator Obama’s election as our first African-American president has generated a depth of emotion which could not be matched by anyone else. That the majority of white citizens would have cast their vote for someone with his ethnic heritage would have been unthinkable even twenty years ago. Maybe this is A New Day Dawning. Who knows?

Expectations are high; optimism is rampant. But I am pretty positive about one thing. I am absolutely sure that sooner or later we will be disappointed.

Remember, when President Kennedy was elected—the youngest man ever, the first born in the 20th century, the first non-Protestant—expectations ran high. But we weren’t far along in the “Camelot” years when some were disappointed. And had he not been martyred, I imagine things might not have continued on such a high note.

When President Carter came into office, following the Watergate affair and in the aftermath the resignation of his predecessor, people hoped that things would fare better under that Southern Baptist peanut farmer with the wide smile. But then came the disappointments of the oil embargo and the Iranian hostage situation.

When President Clinton entered the White House, many anticipated that a sputtering economy would right itself, and we halfheartedly hoped there would be something new on the health-care scene. But then in his second term. . . . Well, you know that story, and it certainly was disappointing, wasn't it?

Eight years, when ago President Bush was inaugurated, spokespersons for the so-called "Evangelical" wing of the religious landscape hailed him as something of a hero for Christian causes. But I understand that in recent years they, too, have felt their idol became tarnished.

And now we have the beginning of President Obama's tenure, which many have greeted as A New Day Dawning. But if history teaches us anything, it tells us that the one thing we can count on is that sooner or later we will be disappointed. Disappointed—maybe not with the man himself, but likely just with the way some thing will turn out. Given the economic depression and the ongoing wars he inherited, that's almost a given, isn't it?

I wonder, brothers and sisters, whether we could say some of the same things about ourselves, about our life together within this congregation. Last Sunday, you know, we managed to patch together a balanced budget for the coming year. Thanks to some generous pledges by many of our fellow-members, plus a sizeable reduction in our offerings for the work of the church at large, we should be OK for the time being. Next year, of course, is another story. And we have to wonder what we should be doing in the meantime.

So here's the deal. If we can see this financial squeeze as a kind of wake-up call, and if we can therefore determine to be more intentional about reaching out into our community, and if we can honestly recognize that our community is more richly diverse than it was fifty years ago, and if we can decide that it would be a blessing for our church to reflect that diversity. . . . Well, if we can do that, don't you think we would be ushering in a New Era? Don't you think we could look back on this time and conclude that this must have been A New Day Dawning?

We don't often have an "altar call" in a church like ours. We don't get you all inspired and excited, and then call you down front, to kneel before the altar and make a commitment of some sort, and then let you go with a prayer and a blessing. And trust me, I'm not going to try that this morning.

But you could think of our time this morning as an invitation for each of you to join Pastor Roth and myself, and our Leadership Board, and our staff, and our rejuvenated Outreach Commission, and others who are excited about the possibilities God has placed before us. . . . You could decide today to join us in reaching out more intentionally, and to shape our ministries in ways which place us squarely in the middle of our changing neighborhoods. Wouldn't that be something? Wouldn't that be something good? Wouldn't that be a way to foster the common good of our entire community? Wouldn't that be A New Day Dawning?

Something like that could transform our congregation! We don't know *exactly* what we are going to do. Discovering our new path will be part of the adventure. But I can promise you this: One thing I do know is that sooner or later we will be disappointed. That's life. That's reality. And that's part of the challenge.

But then again, dealing with the disappointments of a new era is hardly new. Nearly 2,000 years ago the apostle St. Paul had to deal with a dozen or so sticky-wicket issues in the fledgling congregation he had founded in the city of Corinth. That's in Greece, you know. It had kind of an unsavory reputation as a seaport and trading center. The man must have felt flummoxed. He had preached the Gospel there. He had brought them to saving faith in Christ Jesus. No doubt he thought that for them it was A New Day Dawning.

Then, after he had been gone for more than a few months, everything fell apart. If there was a possibility for getting something wrong, they got it wrong.

Why can't the leaders of our different groups seem to get along? Can a man have sex with his father's wife? Can you sue a fellow-believer in civil court? Is it OK to do it with a prostitute? Is it alright to get married? Do married people *have* to have sex? (What's with these people?) Can a woman divorce her unbelieving husband just because he's an unbeliever? Can we shop at a meat market run by a pagan temple? Are women allowed to worship if they're not wearing a hat? What about people who get drunk at Communion? Is it alright to interrupt a service by speaking in tongues? Will we really rise from the dead?

The apostle must have been disappointed, don't you think?

I like the way he handled it. He acknowledged right off that things are different. "The time is short," he said. And then, "*The shape of this cosmos is passing away.*" And in between he added a few bits of advice: "If you're married, pretend you're not." (I'm not sure I like that at all.) "If you're sad or happy, pretend you're not." "If you're a shopper, or a businessman, pretend you're not." Why? Because "*the shape of this cosmos is passing away.*"

Now, either he was flat-out wrong, or else he was exaggerating. I think it's the latter. Because after twenty centuries—that's a long time, not a short time—this universe, this cosmos, has not been bent out of shape. But we can use our holy imagination and pretend it has. We can live *as if* this were A New Day Dawning. Because now we—you and I—have a new thing going for us. We have a new man going for us.

Jesus.

You watch him in action, and you'll know what I mean. Today we saw how he just walks up to a pair of fishermen, calls them over, and they drop their gear and follow him along the shore. He sees two brothers fixing nets in a beached boat; they leave their Dad and a bucket of fish; they climb out of the boat and join his entourage. It must have been A New Day Dawning for them, don't you think?

Keep watching. You'll discover what a brilliant teacher he was. You'll hear his little one-liners, the ones which practically knock you off your feet and force you to rethink your priorities. "The Sabbath was made for man," for example, "not man for the Sabbath." What exactly does that mean? You know, I'm not entirely sure, but we certainly do have to think about it, don't we?

And the stories he spins, they're almost like riddles. God's reign is like a mustard seed, he tells us. It grows into a—what?—a bush. Big deal! On second thought, maybe that *is* the way God would work with us. Maybe that *is* a big deal.

Keep watching. And you'll see how he touches people who are really hurting, how he heals them and restores them to their families and their community. Peter's fevered mother-in-law, an ulcerating leper, a menopausal woman, somebody's comatose daughter, a visually impaired beggar, a crazy man who lives in the cemetery—the list goes on and on. You won't find it hard to imagine him touching you, and healing you, and restoring you.

Keep watching. And you will notice how he manages to invite all kinds of people into his circle of friends. We've already mentioned the fishermen; add to the list a revenue agent, an insurrectionist, that formerly blind beggar, a prostitute. You get the idea his fellowship is wide enough to include the meanest and worst of humankind. Maybe even people like us, huh?

Keep watching. Until he's dead. Realize just how badly humanity can treat someone as good as he was. As good as he *is*. Then stay for the rest of the show. Because forty hours later he'll be back! Alive and kicking and regrouping the troops. That first Easter morning, that really was A New Day Dawning, wasn't it?

Well, that's enough for one ice-cold winter morning. Our Jesus still has the power to turn us into the kind of people who can dare to reach out, with courage and boldness, into a changed and changing community. Now, if any of this touches your heart and you feel excited about the prospects, join the mission. There's a poster out there in the narthex somewhere. Add your name, and we'll get back to you, I promise. Meanwhile, remember what the apostle said: "*The shape of this cosmos is passing away.*" Or, in other words—say it with me—there's A New Day Dawning! Amen.

Epiphany 3 + January 25, 2009
Woodlake + Richfield
Dr. Mark I. Wegener