

“Reflections of an Opaque Mirror” – Grant Martens – Dec 7, 2014

This week’s Canadian Mennonite has an interesting article by Stuart Scadron-Wattles entitled ‘The desert of Advent: our passage to Christmas.’ In this article, the writer argues that Christians need to find the Christmas spirit by passing through the desert of Advent; a place where nothing is fruitful, where we spin our wheels and get stuck in the sand, where - if left alone - we will die of spiritual hunger and thirst.’

Scadron-Wattles reminds us that as Christians, we are in a state of flux. On the one hand, Jesus was born and by that fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament. On the other hand, Jesus promised his disciples that he would return. As Christians, we exist between these two events. We do not have the power to end this period of waiting, but we do have the power to recognize and work within it. Our charge is to watch and wait for when Christ will return in power and glory. Our charge is to listen for the voice in the wilderness. And our charge is to find peace within this state of uncertainty.

Advent for Christians should be a time for reflection and speculation. When will Christ return? Jesus did not give the disciples an exact date and time. Jesus told his disciples that no one knows the day or hour that these things would happen. No one knows when Christ will return in power and glory. No one knows how long Christians have to watch and wait for the next Christmas event.

As our culture grounds itself in scientific methodology, this should come as no big surprise. Scientific methodology defines knowledge as the fact or condition of knowing something with familiarity gained through experience or association. The future, by comparison, is something that we have not yet experienced. Since we have not yet experienced the future, we cannot make any associations with the future. Hence, by our very definition of “knowledge” – knowing something with familiarity gained through experience or association – we exclude the possibility of knowing anything about the future. We exclude the possibility of knowing anything about our Christmas event.

The scientific definition of knowledge is not the only definition of knowledge, and it is not necessarily even the correct definition of knowledge. According to our definition, we know something because of our experiences and associations with that thing. For instance, I know that ravens are black because I have seen black ravens. Logically, however, I cannot see one black raven and by it conclude that all ravens are black. Why? Seeing one, two or even a zillion black ravens does not exclude the possibility that somewhere there is a pink raven. The only way that I can know that all ravens are black is if I see every instance of a raven. I need to do the impossible. I need to see every raven that was, is and will be. Hence, the implication of our current definition of knowledge makes it impossible for me to know that ravens are black.

There is another problem with our current definition of knowledge; it is limited by a serious prejudice. If we know ‘knowledge’ because of our experiences with knowledge,

then our definition of knowledge should account for all those instances where someone knew something, even where someone seemed to know something before she or he actually experienced it. Our current definition does not include these instances because science does not want to grant that they are “scientific”.

At this point, you might assume that only prophets and shamans seem to know things before the experience them. And you might think that I am contrasting visionaries with scientists who methodically test the validity of hypotheses through experimentation. I am not. Visionaries, prophets and shamans are not the only people who seem to know things before they experience them. On many instances, scientists themselves fall under this umbrella.

For example, in 1907 Einstein predicted that the gravity of a star could bend light that passed by it. At the time, Einstein had no empirical evidence to prove his theory. His theory was entirely mathematical since equipment in 1907 was not sensitive enough for such measurements. The first successful measurement of this phenomenon occurred in 1925, but the theory was only conclusively proven in 1959, four years after Einstein died. And so according to our definition of knowledge, we have to conclude that Einstein never knew that strong gravity bent light. But this seems illogical. How can we say that the person who introduced the theory never knew it?

Our very definition of knowledge purposely excludes things that many cultures did consider being forms of knowledge. And when times are good, most people are content with the knowledge of science. When we are at peace with ourselves, knowledge of the future or of things unseen is a novelty. People get their palms read at carnivals. They check their horoscopes in the daily papers and magazines. They laugh over their fortune cookies. They read the latest predictions in the National Inquirer.

When times are not so good, people become less content with the limits of scientific knowledge. They ask questions that science cannot answer. When there is no peace, people begin to search for reassurance. People want to know whether things will improve or get worse. They want to know whether there is hope or despair in their future. They want to know what science cannot tell them. So these people begin to look for prophets and visionaries. As was done in the age before science and technology, people begin to listen to those people who know or claim to know the things that fall outside the scope of experience.

In the desert of Advent, we are people who should long for things that lie outside the scope of scientific inquiry. Today our focus is that if we listen for the voice crying out in the wilderness, we can find peace during this time of waiting. Can we know this? Science cannot show this to us. In fact, science tells us that many of the things we believe are false because they are things that fall outside the scope of common experience. And so, this leaves us with a question. If we listen for the voice crying in

the desert, how do we judge whether we are listening to the right voice? What is more important, how do we interpret the words and vision of the voice that we are hearing?

The Navigator: A Medieval Odyssey is a brilliant film. It is not a colourful film. It is a science fiction film, but it is not a film that contains furry dragons, trolls, munchkins or any other imaginative beast. It is not a film that plays out in a different time or place. The story of The Navigator is a story about normal humans visiting the city of Manukau, New Zealand in the year 1988. What makes this story science fiction is the perspective of the travellers. The travellers in this story arrive in Manukau from the year 1348.

The story begins during the time of the Black Plague. Griffin is a young boy plagued by visions of a church and of an odyssey to that church. The Black Plague is drawing near Griffin's village, and the villagers believe that their only hope is to make a pilgrimage to a great church on the other side of the world. They believe that they must travel through the earth to the church that Griffin sees in his dream and set a spike on the steeple of that great church.

The story is often confusing. We see the odyssey from Griffin's perspective and Griffin's perspective constantly moves back and forth between the odyssey and visions of the odyssey. We are never sure if the travellers are really travelling through the world, or if Griffin is telling a story about them travelling through the earth. The travellers know that Griffin is telling them a story as they sit in a cave together, but the story seems so real that nobody is really sure if it is just a dream. What is more confusing is that when the travellers return, the village appears to be safe. The villagers hear the bells that are supposedly ringing on the far side of the earth and nobody in the village wakes up with the disease. Was the odyssey a story or did it actually happen?

The Navigator is a movie about prophets and prophecy. Griffin is a boy who is different from other boys. He sees things that others do not see. He sees things that lie outside the scope of common experience. As a result, children tease Griffin, saying that he has "angels in his head." Adults scoff at Griffin and ask him whether the moon has struck him daft. But, the villagers know that Griffin's visions do often come true. Hence, with the approach of the plague, they are willing and eager to listen to Griffin.

In The Navigator, Griffin sees visions of a great church and of a quest to the church. However, the travellers soon realize that these visions are not clear enough to guide Griffin and his friends. Time after time people ask Griffin to tell them where they are or where they have to go, but Griffin cannot do this. This is not the nature of prophetic knowledge. What is more important, that is not the role of a prophet.

In Isaiah 40, Isaiah has visions of God restoring the land to the people of Israel.

*1 Comfort, O comfort my people says your God. 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. 3 A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. 5 Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.*

Isaiah's vision is both clear and opaque. The vision tells the people of Israel that God will forgive and restore Jerusalem, but it does not tell them how and when that will happen. Was it Isaiah's role to explain this vision and lead the people in search of the signs? Was it Isaiah's role to search for valley being lifted up and mountains being made low? Or was Isaiah's role simply to have the vision?

Prophets are speakers of things that lie outside the scope of common experience. Prophets are speakers of or for God. Prophets see things and hear things that do not lie in the realm of natural sight or sound. Prophets see things and hear things that are not clear or easily identifiable. They see snapshots of what might become reality, but not the total picture. In Isaiah 40, Isaiah hears a voice crying in the wilderness. Isaiah does not see whose voice it is. Although we understand the image to refer to John the Baptist, Isaiah does not specifically hear the voice of John the Baptist crying in the wilderness near the river Jordan. Isaiah's vision is of a voice crying in the wilderness.

Griffin saw the images in his visions, but he had no idea what that images were. Griffin was from 1348. The things that existed in 1988 – freeways, cars, cranes, subways, electric grindstones--- were far beyond the scope of Griffin's experience. For example, one of Griffin's visions was of something moving in water. Eventually, Griffin actually saw this vision. It was a submarine diving. Before this time, however, Griffin did not know that he was seeing a submarine diving. He only knew that he was seeing something moving in the water. Griffin only knew what his visions were after he had seen them. He only knew what his visions were after they had been fulfilled. Hence, Griffin could not use the visions to guide the group. He could only use the visions to affirm what they had done.

Likewise, John the Baptist had a vision that he did not fully understand until the vision was fulfilled. John the Baptist had a vision of someone greater than he coming after him.

*7 He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thongs of his sandals. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*

John the Baptist did not have a vision of Jesus from Nazareth. He did not have a vision of Jesus the carpenter. He did not have a vision of that exact day when Jesus would

meet him at the river. John the Baptist could not describe the person in this vision to a sketch artist and by that have a picture of Jesus to distribute to his followers. John's vision was that of a person who was coming after him and who was far greater than him. John the Baptist only knew that the person in his vision was Jesus when John the Baptist came face to face with Jesus.

Not all prophets are as lucky as Griffin and John the Baptist. Unlike Griffin and John the Baptist, most prophets do not see their visions. When prophets do not see their own visions fulfilled, this leaves interpretation in the hands of other people. Isaiah did not meet the person whose voice he heard crying in the wilderness. Centuries later, Mark interpreted this passage as pointing to John the Baptist. Hence, Mark begins his gospel with the account of John the Baptist in the wilderness.

*4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.*

Mark believed that John the Baptist was the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy. To prove this Mark describes the ragged clothes that John the Baptist wore and the food that he ate. They were the clothing and the food of someone in the wilderness. But, not all people shared this interpretation of Isaiah 40. Rabbis of that same time – the first century – believed that Elijah was the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy. Who was right? Whose voice did Isaiah hear in the wilderness? Whose voice do we consider when we interpret this passage today?

The Navigator vividly shows us a prophet who is constantly surprised by his visions. Throughout the course of the movie, Griffin tries to understand his visions. His visions are like pieces of a puzzle that he tries to piece together. The most troubling vision Griffin has is of someone falling from the steeple of the great church. Griffin's only other clue to the identity of this person is of a gauntlet drifting to the ground. The only person wearing gauntlets in the group is Conner – Griffin's beloved brother. Hence, Griffin believes that Conner is going to die.

Conner has gone ahead of the rest of the group, so Griffin and the others desperately race to the church to save Conner. In the end, however, it is Griffin who falls off the church steeple. So what went wrong? Did Griffin's visions lie? No. Griffin just misinterpreted his visions. Griffin did have clues that he would die. Griffin had a vision of the cross he wore floating in the water. Griffin also had a vision of Conner pushing a coffin adrift in the lake near their village. Griffin just chose to ignore those visions in his belief that Conner was in danger.

Likewise, I am sure that many Old Testament prophets would be surprised by their visions. This is the nature of prophecy. Prophets gaze into a mirror that does not necessarily reflect this immediate reality. Prophets gaze into an opaque mirror. They gaze into a mirror that shows them pieces of a puzzle instead of the finished puzzle. As people of Advent, we must remember this as we listen to those who gaze into opaque mirrors. We long for the return of Christ. The temptation might therefore be to find those visions that we can somehow construe in such a way that we begin to think that Christ will return in our lifetime. In times like this, we need to remind ourselves of the nature of prophecy.

As opaque mirrors, prophecies of Christ returning do not tell us the how and when of Christ's return. They simply tell us that Christ will return. Our task is to be ready. The Lord will come as a thief at night, and we must resign ourselves to this reality. We must acknowledge that we cannot know when Christ will return and instead concentrate on preparing ourselves for that day. We must concentrate on being people of peace.

*8 Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart and a humble mind. 9 Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called - that you might inherit a blessing. 10 for "Those who desire life and desire to see good days, let them keep their tongues from evil and their lips from speaking deceit; 11 let them turn away from evil and do good; let them seek peace and pursue it. 12 For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."*

Let us be at peace with the prophecies that Christ will truly return. God longs to gather us in, so let us be patient that God will act in God's own time.