

CONNECTICUT CONFERENCE  
ASYLUM HILL UCC  
NOVEMBER 4, 2007  
GENESIS 12:1-4  
EPHESIANS 1:15-23

### WITH THE EYES OF YOUR HEART ENLIGHTENED

In a little more than 18 months, I will celebrate the fortieth anniversary of preaching my first sermon. It is easy to remember because it was on the Sunday of Woodstock. While I make no claim to being a biblical scholar, I've been doing this a long time. But when I researched the passages for today's All Saints Sunday, I had no recollection of ever reading the phrase in Ephesians, so central to understanding how God empowers us: "with the eyes of your heart enlightened."

What an amazing image and how relevant for us today. This passage tapped into one of the great influences on my childhood: Antoine de Saint Exupery's *The Little Prince*, with its central message, "it is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye." The phrase virtually exploded into my consciousness and prompted all kinds of imagery.

This is what I find most astounding about Scripture. It is not a club, as some would have us believe, to wield against people who are different, but rather a reservoir of imagery meant to inform and inspire. You can read the Bible a thousand times and still it is new.

[Prayer]

On this All Saints Sunday, certainly when I think about the Connecticut Conference, I will always think about the saints that made General Synod the amazing experience that it was. So, I begin with a word of thanksgiving for all you saints who invested so much of yourselves into that time—a time that will prove, I have no doubt, to be a focal point for lasting change in the United Church of Christ. There has already been a deluge of comments that have gone to Edith and others saying that future General

Synods MUST have the same kind of joyous spirit, the same kind of challenging content, the same kind of transforming impact as what happened here in Hartford. And, with the eyes of our hearts enlightened, it now can be so.

Two weeks before General Synod, I received word that after a seven month interview process, I would be called to be the Founding Director of Intersections, a new multi-faith global initiative based in NYC and underwritten by the Collegiate Church of NY, the oldest corporation in North America. A word about Intersections: its goal is to bring people together in innovative ways who fundamentally disagree, with the hope of finding common ground and forging outcomes-based strategies that address those issues of peace, justice and reconciliation that divide us.

And so, for me, General Synod was especially poignant, knowing that the relationships I had built at 700 Prospect and across the UCC would not have the same day-to-day engagement. And yet, I am still UCC, as far as I can tell, I will always be UCC, and so I am a part of you and can reflect along with you about what this incredible event means for the future, not only of the UCC, but for the whole church and the wider world. So let's begin by first examining the world in which we live, and let's start with science:

Biologist J.B.S. Haldane once said, "My... suspicion is that not only is the universe queerer than we suppose, but it is queerer than we *can* suppose." Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, professor at Oxford University, author of *The God Delusion* and no friend of the church, reminds us that our very existence is astoundingly surprising.

Dawkins, like Haldane, claims there are dimensions of the universe that are ungraspable—God, apparently, being one of them for Dawkins—because our brains have evolved, through millions and millions of infinitesimal changes, to help us cope with the limited reality that surrounds us. Science has taught us—against all intuition—that apparently solid things, like rocks, are actually composed almost entirely of empty space. The hardest rock we know consists of vast empty places broken only by tiny particles so widely scattered they shouldn't count. Rocks feel hard because our hands and other objects cannot penetrate them. It is useful for our brains to construct notions of solidity and impenetrability.

Similarly, on the cosmic scale, objects that matter to our survival—buildings, trees, mountains—which are actually hurtling through the universe—either stand still or move slowly when compared to the speed of light. So, historically, very improbable notions, like the earth revolving around the sun, could safely be treated as impossibilities. We exist in a world that is larger than the atomic scale and smaller than the cosmic scale. This Dawkins calls Middle World. In this middle world, it is difficult to grasp concepts like the speed of light or being a neutrino passing through a rock. We are evolved citizens of middle world and this limits what we are even capable of imagining.

But with the eyes of our hearts enlightened, we might discover new ways to become a transforming presence in this universe that we inhabit.

In his book, *The Singularity is Near*, Ray Kurzweil—one of the sixty presenters at Synod in the City—maps the rate of technological advancement since time began and finds that the rate of change is not linear but exponential. The “singularity” predicts the liberation of consciousness from the confines of human biology, allowing us to interact directly with computer networks. We will become one with machines.

Neural implants—that already exist—will enhance memory, correct personality disorders. Nanobots, robots designed on a molecular level, such as respirocytes—mechanical red-blood cells—will have myriad roles within the human body, including reversing human aging. Billions of nanobots in the capillaries of the human brain will create virtual reality from within the nervous system. You will be able to be a different person both physically and emotionally. Other people—such as your romantic partner—will be able to select a different body for you than you might select for yourself.

The ethical implications of all this are overwhelming. And while we quibble over restrictions on stem cell research, these changes are already occurring *at an exponential pace*. Many, according to Kurzweil, will occur in the first half of this century.

To understand the impact of this, we might remember the Chinese tale about the emperor and the inventor of chess. In response to the emperor's offer of a reward for his newly beloved game, the inventor asked for a single grain of rice on the first square of the chess board, two grains of rice on the second square, four on the third, and so on.

The Emperor quickly granted this seemingly benign request. Initially, the transaction was uneventful. Spoonfuls of rice led to bowls of rice, then barrels. By the end of the first half of the chess board, the inventor had accumulated one large field's worth (4 billion grains) and the emperor began to notice. The second half of the board, 63 doublings, ultimately totaled 18 million trillion grains of rice. At ten grains of rice per square inch, this requires rice fields covering twice the surface of the Earth, oceans included. It is in dispute whether the emperor went bankrupt or the inventor lost his head.

But as Kurzweil points out, with regard to the doublings of computation, we currently stand about  $\frac{1}{2}$  way through the chess board: there have been slightly more than 32 doublings of performance since the first programmable computers were invented during World War II.

“So what?” you may ask. “What has this to do with me?”

Well, let's take my Dad. I love my Dad; I've known him all my life. A few years ago his hearing began to fail and he started wearing a hearing aid. No one would doubt that he is still my Dad—just, my Dad with a hearing aid. But then he needed a hip replacement. He's still my dad—now with a hearing aid and an artificial hip. Recently, he had a pacemaker put in to monitor his heartbeat. So, now he's my dad with a hearing aid, an artificial hip and a pacemaker. But, what if he has a neural implant to enhance his memory or change his personality? Or what if he has ten neural implants? Or a hundred, or a million? When does he cease being my dad—and who or what does he become?

This was the world in which the United Church of Christ, in celebration of its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, decided to host an event in Hartford, Connecticut, an event that *engaged* this complex and often confounding reality. And engage it we did. Almost 10,000 UCC members and friends transformed the city of Hartford into a festival of intellectual stimulus, cultural diversity, aesthetic excellence and spiritual renewal.

In a few minutes some of you will share your personal reflections on what happened so that through your stories we might better understand our future.

But now, it is appropriate that we ask, along with those memorable words at the conclusion of the movie, *The Candidate*, when Robert Redford unexpectedly wins, and turns to campaign manager Peter Boyle and asks, “so, what do we do now?”

When confronted with such cosmic questions, I often look to scripture. Hence, the 12<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Genesis:

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed. So Abram went, as the Lord had told him.

God offers a good three point sermon to Abram.

The first point is the command “to go.” Dr. Ephrain Agosto from Hartford Theological Seminary speaks of an intense study undertaken around the Hebrew word translated here. Experts from across the country gathered and offered papers and perspectives. After significant scholarly input and intellectual deliberation, the conclusion was that the Hebrew word translated as “go” actually means “GO.”

Simple. Direct. Don’t just sit there. Go.

The second point is that God does not say where to go—“to a place that I will show you.” At the time of departure, there is no land of milk and honey, but there *is* a “promised land” because God says that God WILL show Abram where to go...just not yet.

The third point is that God offers Abram greatness, a blessing, if he goes. He will not be able to hide in the shadows but his light will shine on the hill.

And so—Abram went. No hesitation, no elaboration. He just WENT. And his name became blessed.

With the eyes of your hearts enlightened, it is easy to see that if we are to be faithful and build upon the success of General Synod, we too are called to risk, to go forward boldly and creatively into a world where we cannot predict the final destination. And by the way, if you read the passage with only the first ½ of verse four, as I did, it ends in a comma.

In today’s lesson from Ephesians, it is important to note that this passage is written to both the Jews and the Gentiles, calling all to respond to the hope that is found in the Gospel, that we might be inspired and empowered to do amazing things.

Theologian William Loader describes the passage as such: “Whatever it may take, ensuring we have a sound foundation of hope is a key to life. Hope occupies the God-spot in our lives, just as God occupies the hope-spot. It gives us a sense that life is worth going on. Notice that the wisdom about this is not expansive knowledge or speculation about what it might turn out to be in detail. There is nothing of that. The hope is totally focused on God - so the details can be left. It is not a hope we control by having knowledge about it. It is rich; it is glorious; it is, in fact, God's being. It is not to be commodified into a package and put on the greed-shelf of spiritual consumerism.”

The Bible states that it was written to the church at Ephesus, but some early manuscripts do not contain an address found in 1:1, which would imply that Ephesians was a circular letter, sent to a number of churches. If so, it introduced a new idea into letter writing, since we know of no other circular letters from this period. Hence: an innovation in technology—I bet you’ve never heard Paul referred to as a technology innovator. In our world, finding life-affirming ways to use emerging technology is essential to our mission.

A comprehensive study on the quantity of data produced in the world, undertaken by Stanford University’s Peter Lyman and Hal Varian, found that in 2002 *alone*, print, film, magnetic and optical storage produced the equivalence of all the words ever spoken by human beings up to that time. Research shows that 57% of American teenagers create content for the internet. 31 billion emails are sent each day. A new blog is created every second of every day, and the “blogosphere” is doubling in size every five months. This year YouTube passed 150 million monthly visitors, with 100 million videos viewed every day. 1.17 billion video streams have been initiated. There are more than 9.5 million participants in Second Life. In June, Nielsen reported that MySpace has 60 million participants, all creating online content and networking with one another. Upstart Facebook passed 30 million members this summer.

In 2005 there were more computer chips produced than grains of rice.

As Woody Allen said, “What if everything is an illusion and nothing exists. In that case, I definitely overpaid for my carpet.”

Tolkien says, “It does not do you good to leave a dragon out of your calculations, if you live near him.” And the dragons are many in our chaotic world. But out of the chaos of Pentecost, the church was born. And out of the chaos of the universe, God created the heavens and the earth. Six times in the first chapter of Genesis does God see the world and call it good. Six times. The seventh time, God calls it very good. But nowhere, does God say it’s perfect and nowhere does God say it’s finished. Into the midst of this chaotic mix, we must continue to proclaim the distinctive witness of the United Church of Christ so that, like the prophet Habakkuk says, “those who run may read it.”

The challenge before Abram is central to the challenge for us: to venture forth in a world that seems more divided, more hostile, more exclusive with each new day. Considering both Richard Dawkins’ challenge to our imaginations and Ray Kurzweil’s warnings about the rapid changes just around the corner, if we are to be faithful, we too are called to risk, to go forward boldly and creatively into the world, even though we cannot predict our final destination. Dennis Heany, communication director for the Christophers reminds us that change is inevitable; growth is optional.

If we are to grow in faith beyond our first fifty years, we must venture forth into all of life’s intersections, finding new ways to heal the wounds that divide us and break down the barriers that exclude. With the eyes of our hearts enlightened, we must continue to heed the lessons of our stillspeaking campaign and launch an increasing effort on the strength of our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. We must proclaim who we are and offer Jesus’ extravagant welcome all along the way. We must engage the society that surrounds us and speak truth to power. The time is *now*. The task is *ours*.

(Responses to reflections)

1. I am reminded of the cellist in Sarajevo who, in the midst of the Balkan War, took his instrument into the town square and set up his chair. As bombs were falling all around, he began to play. A reporter, sensing a great story, dodged the raining shrapnel, raced up to him and asked, “why are you out here playing your cello while they’re dropping bombs?” The cellist looked at the reporter and asked with indignation, “why are

they dropping bombs while I'm playing my cello?" How we frame our future is critical to what our future will hold.

2. A wise grandmother took her grandson to the crest of a cliff and there in a cloud formation were two wolves, faced off against each other. "Look carefully," the grandmother said, "and you'll see that one wolf is filled with anger and greed, with bigotry and violence. Look again, and you will see the other is filled with wonder and hope, humility and grace." The grandmother became silent, as if awaiting an epic battle in the sky. "Which one wins?" asked the grandson. "The one you feed, my child, the one you feed."

3. Imagination is key. I am reminded not of the sayings of a futuristic communications expert, or some internet guru, or a cutting-edge economist, but of the words of a freed slave, the first published African American author in the US, Phillis Wheatley who in 1773 published a poem, *On Imagination*.

Imagination! Who can sing thy force?  
Or who describe the swiftness of thy course?  
Soaring through the air to find the bright abode  
Th'empyrean palace of the thund'ring God  
We on thy pinions can surpass the wind  
And leave the rolling universe behind:  
From star to star the mental optics rove,  
Measure the skies, and range the realms above.  
There in one view we grasp the mighty whole,  
Or with new worlds amaze th'unbounded soul.

4. I conclude with a word about the simple comma. The poet e.e.cummings is perhaps the best ever to capture the possibilities of punctuation as a window into new paradigms and images. His use of spacing, capitalization, verb tenses, spelling and

punctuation challenge the senses as his poems cascade across the page in unusual ways. But one poem in particular underscores the power of such imagery:

since feeling is first  
who pays any attention  
to the syntax of things  
will never wholly kiss you;  
wholly to be a fool  
while Spring is in the world

my blood approves,  
and kisses are a better fate  
than wisdom  
lady I swear by all the flowers. Don't cry  
-- the best gesture of my brain is less than  
your eyelids' flutter which says

we are for each other:then  
laugh,leaning back in my arms  
for life's not a paragraph

And death I think is no parenthesis

Life is not a paragraph, and death, I think, is no parenthesis. As Oscar Wilde once said, "we are all lying in the gutter, but some of us are gazing at the stars." So go, even though you are not yet aware of your destination. Let the eyes of your heart be enlightened. Listen carefully to the stillspeaking God. Be joyful. Be creative. And know, that the One we worship and serve will never leave us desolate.