

# Giving up magical thinking

*Sermon preached by the Rev. William McD. Tully, Rector,  
at the eleven o'clock service, November 27, 2011, The First Sunday of Advent.  
Based on Isaiah 64:1-9 and Mark 13:24-37*

**A**t the beginning of my ministry, flush with excitement at getting to do what I felt called to do, I was surprised by many things—you know, the things they can't tell you in seminary. And above all, I was astonished at what people would tell me, what they would trust me to hear.

One day, a man came to see me, a leader in the parish, and in my eyes well heeled, socially secure, visibly part of that old "wasp" mystique.

He hemmed and hawed for a while, and then it became clear: he was confused about what to do, depressed at the state of things. Born to privilege, he was now "on the shelf," as he said, at his firm, one where his father and uncle had long been partners. Remember, this was the 70s, a tough time in New York, long before its revival, long before dot.coms and hedge funds.

"The thing is," he finally said, "it's not working out the way I had counted on. I know it, my wife knows it, my colleagues can sense it. I'm going to be the first in our family for whom things will not be better than it was for the previous generation."

*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*, the French say. The more things change, the more they stay the same. "There is nothing new under the sun," said Ecclesiastes in the Bible.

Our disappointment in what we've been led to believe, our shattering of the expectations we've built for ourselves, is probably as old as our species.

You heard that voice of disappointment in our first reading today, from Isaiah 64:

*From ages past no one has heard,  
no ear has perceived,  
no eye has seen any God besides you,  
who works for those who wait for him.*

Those were the good old days, the days of promise. That's the affirmation of faith. It's what we've been told to expect. But now

*We all fade like a leaf,  
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.  
There is no one who calls on your name . . .  
for you have hidden your face from us,  
It wasn't supposed to be that way. Cue up Handel and hear again:  
Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, saith your God.  
Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem . . .  
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.  
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.*

That's how it was supposed to be. But now the euro has gone bust, our 401k's are in the tank, all that we planned on is now not likely to come about. As with my parishioner so many years ago, it's confusing and depressing. We don't have a script for this.

Except that maybe we do.

The context of Isaiah 64 was the confusion and disappointment in how the homecoming to Jerusalem and its rebuilding had begun to fade like a leaf. The stark reality was that the messianic blessings, the comfort, the glory of the Lord was just not evident. The rough places had not been made smooth, the desert was not blooming, the wealth of the nations had not come flooding into Jerusalem.

The hardest thing to do in times like those—*times like our own*— is to feel the pain and not anesthetize it. Hard to honestly tell ourselves the truth about how we got to where we are. Hard to assess what it will take to make it through, and better than that, to start really living again.

The easier thing is to cry out, as in the beginning of Isaiah chapter 64:

*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,  
so that the mountains would quake at your presence . . .  
to make your name known to your adversaries,  
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!  
When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,  
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.*

In real, historical, psychological and theological terms there's a name for that: magical thinking.

Just about any week you can tune in and watch ten candidates for president "debate." But all seem to agree, or at least say, the magical thing: Extend the tax cuts for the wealthy and all will be well in America. And we haven't begun to hear the other side, who surely will share their own magical thinking and solutions.

Eugene Kennedy, long time teacher and psychologist, former priest, told the truth in an arresting way when he said, "The worst thing about the pain of being human is that it doesn't kill us; we never die of that pain, although we sometimes wish that we could."

Magical thinking is just one kind of tranquilizer, a universal form of denial, dripped out in the usual, and understandable, small doses. The human animal seems hard-wired to deal with that human pain by plain silliness. In this regard, no one is a Nobel laureate.

The neuroscientist Matthew Hutson confesses that "whenever I fly, I place my hands on the fuselage as I step onto the plane. The habit began when I was a kid innocently in awe of flying machines, but over the years as I continued to touch the plane and continued to not die horribly, my brain decided I was keeping the apparatus aloft, and now I do it for peace of mind."

We do a lot for peace of mind. I've already knocked on wood and crossed my fingers and it's just a little after 11. How many of you stepped over the cracks in the sidewalk on your way here?

Magical thinking is everything from common and harmless superstitions—the little things lubricate the tight moments of life—to elaborate denial mechanisms that distort life and all the way to disastrous theologies that impute magic to God, the Holy One, the "creator of all that is, seen and unseen." *As if to say, our magic is better than your magic.*

Is prayer looking up to the sky and asking God to tear it open and restore our fortunes? Is that what we mean by faith? Is that what we advocate as religious practice?

It may be that asking for direct, targeted divine inspiration is one of those things that can just pop out of our mouths. *No atheists in foxholes*, as the saying goes.

But is that the kind of God we really want? And even if we did, is that the God Jesus taught about, the God our sacred traditions says he embodied or incarnated?

I don't think so.

The reliable core of the gospel gives us a more robust Jesus, a more mature teacher. He was in fact the original anti-magical thinking teacher. I'd go so far as to say, *Jesus saves us from magical thinking.*

No let me hone that a little bit: saving can sound magical. He—and note the present tense—*saves us* from the anxious, cheap way out. He challenges us to respect the power of God and God's creation and at the same time to accept a more mature, honest, thoughtful way of living in it.

He knew pain, and he rejected the ways of denying it. He was all about listening to the pain, and living through the anxiety and depression that go with it.

Jesus lived the example of yielding to reality, saying Yes to life and showing how we can say Yes to each other.

He lived out a spirituality of engagement: not confining spirituality to some higher niche in our being, some exotic activity achieved by a few mystics. The whole poetry of the Incarnation is that religion is not a department of life. *It is life.* In the noisy, uncertain, demanding world of our everyday lives, we find the spirit of God. We find that despite all our fears, we are actually accepted as we are. That allows us to accept others as they are.

Life has its everyday deaths, but learning that there is something called resurrection literally picks you up from those little deaths. Resurrection is a radical perseverance, the "keep on keeping on" approach to living.

"Be not anxious about your life," he taught. "Consider the lilies of the field . . . The birds of the air."

"Can you add a single hour to your life by worrying about it?"

"Ask and it will be given. Seek, and you will find. Knock and the door will be open."

Those are comparatively humble actions. Ask, seek, knock—but they're your job description. Waiting for a God who tears open the heavens, for the mountains to quake, is like predicting the end of the world as a threat, a coercive kind of magical thinking.

It's clear that such talk was alive in Jesus' time. In Mark's gospel, Jesus speaks the words and uses the images from the Book of Daniel, how "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light," and "the powers will be shaken" and the Son of Man coming in clouds." It's even clearer that the early Christian community, at first devastated and then just deeply confused, revived that talk to explain why not every bit of magic they wanted and expected hadn't happened in his foreshortened life, the way they had expected. But it's quite clear that he rejected that approach:

"About that day or hour no one knows . . . [so] keep alert, for you do not know when the time will come. . . . Keep awake." That's real power. That's the power of God. Not knowing, but carrying on anyway, is the very opposite of magic, and the very center of faithful living.

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