

MAYFLOWER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
3901 NORTHWEST 63RD STREET
OKLAHOMA CITY, OK 73116
DR. ROBIN R. MEYERS, SENIOR MINISTER
405-842-8897
cyasunday@mayflowerucc.org
www.mayflowerucc.org
© by Robin Meyers

November 29, 2009
Radio 12/6/09

PROLEPSIS

Several years ago I ran across this word and knew that it had been looking for me all my life. I am, after all, a professor of rhetoric, and jargon is the coin of the realm among the tenured. Here's a word that most people are guaranteed not to know, a word that could win someone a fortune if it were the final answer on *Jeopardy* or a question on the NPR show, "Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me." It also happens to explain one of the most paradoxical seasons of the church year, and today is the first Sunday of that time we call Advent – the four Sundays leading up to Christmas, when people light candles and talk about faith, hope, peace, and love.

In fact, just imagine that you were a contestant on *Jeopardy* and it's the end of the game and Alex Trebek has given you your final answer and you've bet your entire sum in a desperate attempt to win. In the category, Obscure Greek Words is this definition: noun, from the Greek *prolambanein* meaning beforehand (*pro* before . . . *lambanein*, to take . . . beforehand), a form of anticipation, meaning "the representation or assumption of a future act or development as if presently existing or accomplished."

Clock is ticking. *Jeopardy* theme song is playing . . . and you are trying to remember all the obscure Greek words that nobody ever uses, so you can scratch it out on your electronic note pad for all those watching at home to see and win the game. And that's when you remember the word that only you know because you are member at Mayflower, and your minister once used this word as the sermon title for the first Sunday in Advent. You write, "What is *Prolepsis*?"

And Alex Trebek, who knows everything, smiles and says, "That's right, what did you wager?" And of course you bet it all, because you knew, and now you are planning to give the entire sum to the church so we can hire an associate! And that's when you think to yourself, Robin keeps talking about this whole associate minister thing as if it has already occurred, which itself is a form of prolepsis. And that's when you realize that Mayflower is not just the House of

Heresy, but the House of Prolepsis — a place where we act as if the future is now, so that the very future we anticipate will be a present reality.

In other words, one of the things that faithful people are supposed to do is act as if what we expect to happen has already happened. In the church we call this Advent and if you are a linear thinker, a sequential thinker, and if/then, cause/effect, past/present/future thinker, this is very confusing. All this talk about waiting, watching, hoping for something to happen that has already happened, and knowing in your heart that because it has already happened, it is more likely to happen — this just messes up everything we were taught about how the past is really prologue to the future.

It also confounds traditional wisdom, which is captured in the familiar song with those familiar words, “Que Sera, Sera—whatever will be, will be, the future’s not ours to see, que sera, sera.” That song was featured in a 1956 Alfred Hitchcock film called (interestingly enough) “The Man Who Knew Too Much,” and then became the theme song for the Doris Day Show.”

Although its etymology is the subject of debate, “que sera, sera” has come to stand for a fatalistic conception of the future: what has to happen, will happen. But the church is saying something entirely different about the coming of Jesus into the world. What has happened, will happen. And we are to live as if it has already happened, even though it is not yet fully accomplished — so that it will be accomplished.

I know, this warps the brain a bit, but here’s another way to understand prolepsis which is more contemporary. It requires that you be something of a mystic, which is required in my opinion to be a Christian in a Roman world. Living with paradox is not an option, but a way of life. To get your mind around such phrases as “the past is prologue,” and “back to the future” (which also became the title of a film), you need to understand, to put this in vernacular of *Star Wars*, that “Once upon a time, in a galaxy far, far away,” we watch movies about things that haven’t happened yet, but we understand them because they are based on things that will happen, which is why everything that is happening now makes sense. We call it, in the movies, a prequel.

And I am quite sure that George Lucas didn’t mean to do this, but he unwittingly gave us the perfect way to understand the way gospel time works.

Once, when I took Cass to see *Episode I: The Phantom Menace*, he just assumed that I understood the whole time frame from watching *Star Wars* with the episodes out of order. I had seen the original episodes when I was living in Enid, and going to Phillips seminary, and so at some point in the movie I became confused and decided to ask Cass why Luke Skywalker had

not yet appeared.

Cass looked at me with that look that says, “You are my dad, so I didn’t choose you, but you are so dumb” and said “He hasn’t been born yet.” I looked confused. He continued, “Dad, Episodes 4, 5 and 6 came, and now we are having 1, 2, and 3.”

Oh. . .I get it. . .that’s why everyone in the theater seems to know so much. They’ve seen the ending, and now we’re seeing the beginning? So, help me understand, it’s really backwards, but it’s OK, because it’s *Star Wars*.

Dad, it’s a *prequel*. This comes before what comes after that has already happened, which is why this makes sense.

Got it. And in fact, I did get it. In fact, I got a whole new way to understand the way the Bible works. You know the end before you know the beginning. In the New Testament, written decades after the death of Jesus, the resurrection reality shines back through every story told, including the story of Jesus’ birth, which is not history, but the myth of adoration shepherds, angels, stars that guided non-existent wise men bringing non-existent gifts to a place where Jesus almost certainly was not born – because Bethlehem is where the messiah was supposed to be born, not Nazareth, that backwater little hamlet out of which nothing good could possibly come. It’s a prequel.

What’s more, we know the *sequel* to the story of adoration and confession after the fact that is the Bible. We’re sitting in it, the sequel is the church, and of course, no matter how fond we are of this one, it is not the only one. There are cathedrals that take your breath away, but there are also simple white frame meeting houses, cinder block squares, metal buildings like the one you store a tractor in with a cross on top, grass huts, igloos, brush arbors. A billion Christians in the world. That’s the sequel.

So now that we know something about non-linear time, which is the only way for us to understand Advent – we are hoping that the way we live in the world as the sequel based on the prequel makes the final episode more likely to occur if we live as if it has already occurred. Got it?

We are to act as if what we expect to happen has already happened because it has. God *has* spoken eloquently and definitively in the life, death, and resurrection of a man named Jesus (in Hebrew Yeshua) almost certainly the illegitimate child of a single parent peasant woman who was no virgin, had brothers and sisters but no known father (and we have a name for children who had no known father) and God is *still speaking* through those who live now and into the

future as if the answer to the problem of human existence has been provided ahead of the question (in a Jeopardy sort of way). Are you still with me?

The prequel would have been very brief indeed if it had been written as a matter of fact. In fact it would have been two words long: nobody knew. At the hour of his birth, nobody was there (well obviously his mother was there, but all the angels, the shepherds, the wise men following that star, Joseph standing nearby looking on awkwardly, like an extra in the crèche scene – forget it.) That is the prequel that only makes sense because we are the living sequel.

The New Testament even gives us hints at how the prequel grew more fantastic over time. For example, Jesus was called, in the earliest Gospel, Mark, the son of Mary. Paul, even earlier, refers to him simply as being born of a woman.

Some Bible scholars argue that Joseph may not even have existed, but is the creation of Matthew to help clean up the story and give Mary a protector, and Jesus a kind of proxy father. Does this mean that Matthew and then Luke are lying? Only if we read the Bible with the eyes of Western rationalism. But if we see what they did as writing a prequel to do justice to the sequel, then the gospels are acts of faith. A bit more inspiring, you must admit than “nobody knew.”

What’s more, the expectation that God has not only spoken, but is still speaking, or as the early Congregational minister John Robinson put it, “has yet more light and truth to break forth out of his holy word,” we are living as the body of Christ with the expectation that even though we know where we are headed, and how we are supposed to get there, we have not yet arrived at our destination. The kingdom has come, is coming, and will come. If an English professor were to mark up the gospels like a freshman comp assignment, he or she would surely say, “this paper is good, even richly textured at times, but there is chronic problem of confused tense. I don’t know, half the time, if we’re talking about past, present, or future. You need to stay in one or the other.”

“But professor,” the wise student might reply, this is my Advent essay. I am practicing *prolepsis*.” Go on. “Well, professor, in the church we find that hope is more poignantly talked about when the days are growing shorter, and the light fades more quickly in the western sky. We sing about a light in the darkness that the darkness has never and will never overcome just when the gathering gloom of winter seems to be having the last word. And we light candles in the cold darkness knowing full well that a candle is not enough to keep us warm.” And you do this why? “Because, professor, we are the Sequel People.”

I say, give that student an A!

For those preachers who follow the lectionary, the passage from Luke this morning, the passage from Luke's gospel is downright frightening: There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

In other words, things will get worse before they get better. The important thing to remember about this text, and the gospels as a whole, is that they were written after the most traumatic event in the life of first-century Jews: the complete destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D., and the slaughter of its leaders, its prophets, and its people once more.

So why does Luke say that there is distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves? Because the sea was the abode of chaos and chaos seemed to be ruling the day. And if this does not seem suddenly relevant, you must not be paying attention. We are confronted on all sides by what seems to be an unstoppable chaos. In Iraq and Afghanistan, we are trying to figure out how to lose without losing, since we have already lost. We know how it ends, and now we are writing our best prequel to the sequel.

The church of the future will have to learn something first about the church of the first century. There were no creeds, no arguments about who was more doctrinally sound, or who was going to heaven and who wasn't. There was only a commitment to living as a thorn in the flesh of the empire as followers of Jesus.

The first followers decided that they knew how it would all turn out, and so they lived in the in-between time as if the fullness of time had already come. They fed the poor, they lived as equals, and they feared neither persecution nor death. Why? Because they believed that they could live now as if the kingdom had come, even though it seemed swallowed up by death, so that someday we would understand what it means to live the beginning as if you knew the ending.

They lived as if God's love and justice were real, even though the world was still broken and blind. Jeremiah put it his way: The days are surely coming when I will fulfill the promise I made. Because with God, a promise made is a promise kept. And everything all around can seem dead and hopeless and God will appear as a tiny green shoot on the root of Jesse.

God can, in fact, turn the world upside down with the words of a child born into oblivion in first century Palestine, who, though fatherless, found a Father not of this world, whom he believed loved everyone in the world, and stood ready to forgive them, and welcome them home.

Whereas the good soldier Colin Powell, against his own better instincts was asked by Dick Cheney to stand before the United Nation and tell the world that the tiny vile he held in his hand was proof of chemical weapons being manufactured in mobile labs by Saddam Hussein, Jesus of Nazareth pointed to a fig tree and said, “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.”

When people talk about the Second Coming, they talk about it as if Jesus himself is coming back, and we will recognize him, not crucify him again. But for me the second coming is when believing in the prequel makes living the sequel a reality once more. As Martin Luther King Jr. put it, I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.

I believe that one day war will cease, and we will study it no more. I believe that we will beat swords into plow shares, and spears into pruning hooks. I believe that one day, no one will go hungry, and that girls will count for as much as boys, and that innocence will be protected.

I believe that civil and human rights will one day belong to everyone on the earth, and that greed will once again be considered deadly.

I believe Isaiah’s prequel that “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them . . . They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”

Prolepsis. . . from the Greek *prolambanein* meaning to take beforehand; a form of anticipation, meaning the representation or assumption of a future act or development as if presently existing or accomplished.

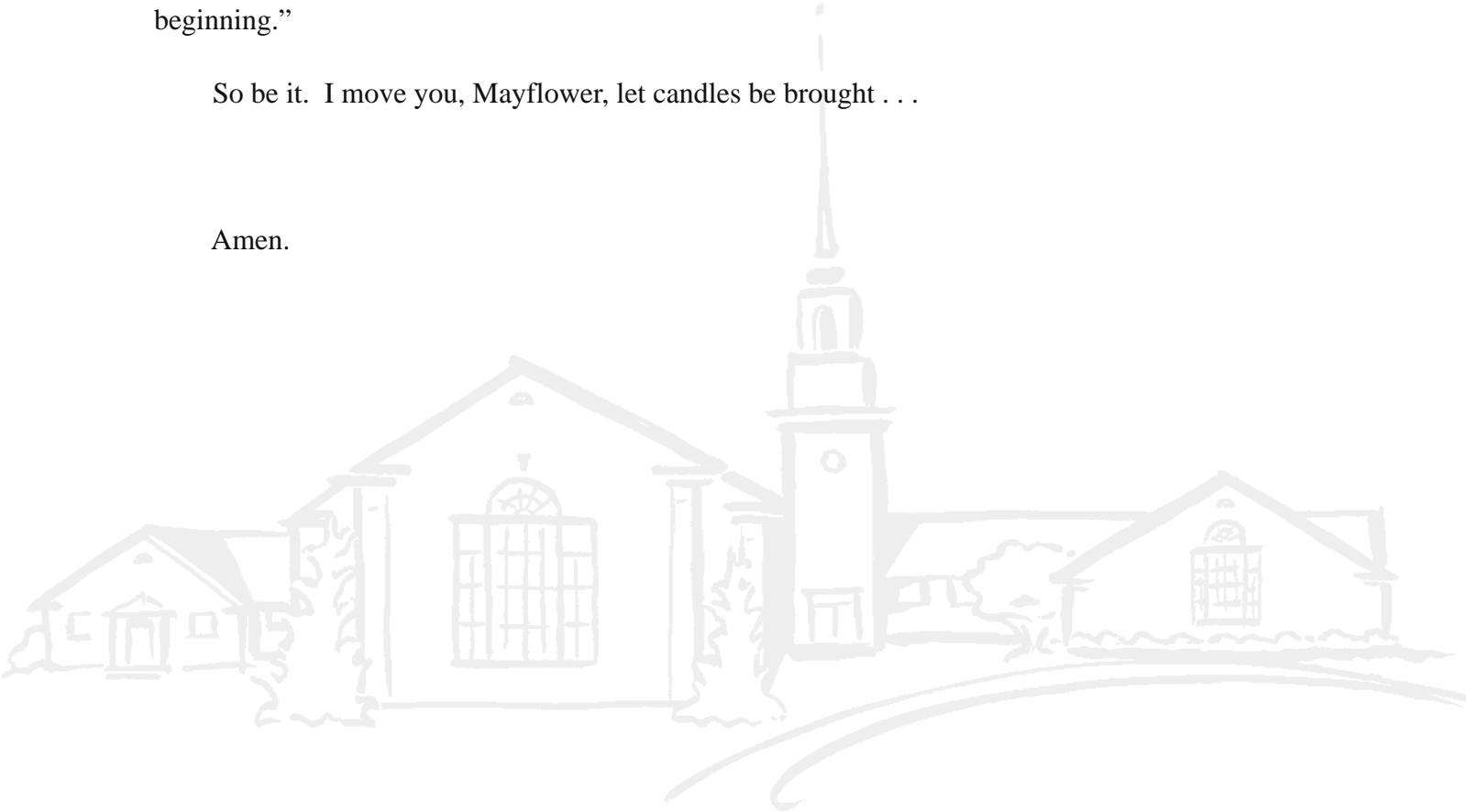
Once, during the colonial period in American history, an eclipse of the sun caught members of a New England state legislature off guard. In the midst of a general panic a motion was made to adjourn, but one of the legislators stood up and said, “Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. If it is the end of the world, I choose to be found doing my duty. I move you, sir, let candles be brought.”

So be it. Perhaps the only things stronger than weapons of mass destruction are candles. Is that foolishness? Perhaps. But if we could agree that peace on earth begins with me, then we might just help to write the prequel to the sequel.

The Roman poet Manlius wrote: *Finis origine pendet*: and so it became the motto for some of the finest institutions of higher learning in the world. It means “The end depends on the beginning.”

So be it. I move you, Mayflower, let candles be brought . . .

Amen.



Copyright 2009 Robin Meyers

Pastoral Prayer for Sunday, December 3, 2006

This morning, for the pastoral prayer, I'd like to read a poem by Mary Oliver, the Pulitzer Prize winning author who lives in Provincetown, Massachusetts. The book from which this poem

comes is entitled *Thirst*, and seem just right to me as we begin the season of Advent:

*Lord, what shall I do that I
can't quiet myself?
Here is the bread, and
here is the cup, and
I can't quiet myself.*

*To enter the language of transformation!
To learn the importance of stillness,
with one's hands folded!*

*When will my eyes of rejoicing turn peaceful?
When will my joyful feet grow still?
When will my heart stop its prancing
as over the summer grass?*

*Lord, I would run for you, loving the miles for your sake.
I would climb the highest tree
to be that much closer.*

*Lord, I will learn also to kneel down
into the world of the invisible,
the inscrutable and the everlasting.
Then I will move no more than the leaves of a tree
on a day of no wind,
bathed in light,
like the wanderer who has come home at last
and kneels in peace, done with all unnecessary things;
every motion; even words.*

[Silence]



Copyright 2009 Robin Meyers