

## TAKE A LOOK AHEAD

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*Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. (2 Peter 3:8)*

When I was growing up in the 1970's my mother had a favorite line up of Saturday evening television programs. One of these was a situation comedy called *The Bob Newhart Show*. Bob Newhart played Dr. Robert Hartley, a Chicago psychologist who worked in a downtown office suite. The cast included Bob's amusing clients, and most especially, Bob's wife Emily, portrayed by Suzanne Pleshette. The show ran from 1972-1978, and then, as is eventually the case with all sit-coms, the powers that be decreed it was time to pull the plug. In the series finale, Bob and Emily decided to move out of state, and that was the end of it.

Four years later Bob Newhart launched a new situation comedy, this one simply called *Newhart*. In the new series Bob's character was Dick Loudin, a New York City author, who with his wife, Joanna, had moved to a small town in Vermont to operate an inn. The reality they encountered in Vermont was beyond quirky, and often surreal. Nothing quite made any sense. Perhaps oddest of all were the three brothers named Larry, Darryl, and Darryl who lived deep in the woods. Every time they appeared in a scene Larry would introduce them by saying, "Hi, I'm Larry, and this is my brother Darryl, and this is my other brother Darryl." The show ran from 1982-1990 until, once again, the powers that be decided to pull the plug and end it.

The series finale of *Newhart* took an imaginative twist no one expected. A Japanese visitor buys up the whole Vermont town and turns it into a golf resort. Cast members become increasingly bizarre until Dick Loudin, Bob Newhart's character, finally proclaims that they are all crazy, and he's leaving for good. He goes out the door of the inn, gets hit in the head with a golf ball, and the scene goes black. After a few seconds a light is turned on, and we see Bob Newhart in bed. He tries to wake up the woman next to him and says, "Honey, you won't believe the dream I just had." The woman groggily switches on her light, rolls over, and behold: it's Suzanne Pleshette, otherwise known as Emily, Bob's wife from the earlier show. Apparently, Bob and Emily had never moved away from Chicago. The whole Vermont reality, all eight years of it, was just a bizarre dream. Emily, perfectly in character, accuses Bob of having eaten too much Japanese food the evening before. They eventually turn off the lights and roll over to sleep.

This brings me back to today's Scripture readings, all three of which speak as if the people are about to wake from a dream. For the Jews to whom the prophet Isaiah preached, it would be the ending of a nightmare. The Jews were captives in Babylon. The Babylonians had conquered them, and carried them away from Jerusalem. For seventy years they had lived in exile, languishing in Babylonian internment camps. Nothing about their Babylonian reality made sense. How could Yahweh be the one, true God if he allowed his own people to be conquered by a pagan nation? How could the Jews be God's people if they didn't live in God's city, in the shadows of God's Temple? How could they sing the Lord's song in a strange land? *By the waters of Babylon they sat down and wept (Psalm 137)*. But then God decreed it was time to pull the plug on the exile, and Isaiah the prophet announced what would be the series finale to beat all: *In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill shall be made low ... then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together (Isaiah 40:3f)*. For the Jews, Isaiah's words meant that they would be going home, and that soon they would awake again in Jerusalem.

Five hundred years later, the Jews had been home for a long time, but now they were embroiled in a different nightmare. The Babylonians were long gone; now it was the Romans who had conquered the Jews. But instead of carrying the people off into exile, the Romans moved in to occupy Jerusalem. Once again, life for the people of God was out of kilter with the ways of God. Nothing made sense. Images of Caesar stood in the Temple. Roman rules clashed with the Mosaic Law. Then, as we heard in the Gospel of Mark, along came John the Baptist, much in the mode of Isaiah the prophet to announce the ending of the nightmare. One of the world's foremost New Testament scholars, N.T. Wright has this to say about how John's words would have hit the people: *You are sound asleep and dreaming, when suddenly the door bursts open and a bright light shines full in your face. A voice breaking in on your dream-world shouts, "Wake up! Get up! You'll be late!" And without more ado, the speaker splashes your face with cold water to make the point. Time to stop dreaming and face the most important day of your life.*<sup>1</sup> John, of course, was referring to the coming of Jesus, who would indeed change everything.

Some sixty years after John preached, Jesus had come, and died, and risen, and inaugurated the kingdom of God by the power of his Spirit. To be sure, life was still hard; the Romans still ruled. But those who claimed the faith of Jesus, and broke bread together in his name, and followed in his ways found new strength to be awake to God, even as the world around them continued to slumber. What is more, as we've heard in today's reading from 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter (3:8-15), the people could expect God's ultimate wake-up call. Jesus would return; *the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise ... but in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, when righteousness is at home.* The author of the Epistle seems to be saying that this earth, this life as we know it, is a dream that will dissolve at the opening of God's new day. Something better is coming. Take a look ahead, declare today's readings.

Here, at the risk of totally dating myself as a creature of the 1970s, I think of the classic rock band, Boston, and their 1977 hit, *Peace of Mind*. The song warns against the world's ways of achieving peace of mind, most especially, climbing the company ladder. "Can't you see there'll come a day when it won't matter – come a day when you'll be gone?" asks the singer. "Take a look ahead," he advises. The implication is, this whole crazy reality before us could be swept away in the blink of an eye. One stray golf ball and the scene could go black. And then what? Take a look ahead.

The prophets and the writers of Scripture tell us to do much the same thing, but with one big difference. While the group *Boston* presented no vision of what we might see if we were to take a look ahead, those who speak through the pages of the Bible do. Take a look ahead through their lens and you'll see mercy and truth, righteousness and peace, justice and prosperity. What they try to describe through the use of sacred imagination is a world we remember, but may never have known. St. John the Divine describes it like this: *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away ... and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals ... he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."* (*Revelation 21*) Take a look ahead. Use your sacred imagination and see the promises of God fulfilled.

For what purpose? What is the point of taking a look ahead and holding to a vision of heaven and earth's being one? What is the use of imagining God's being right in the midst of his people, and wiping every tear from their eyes? What good are such images? The answer should be obvious. Life is a dream that for too many is more like a nightmare. Human relationships, political processes, and economic systems are out of kilter with the ways of God. But throughout history people in distress, people in exile, people under occupation have exercised a sacred, faithful, prophetic imagination. They have taken a look ahead trusting that God is good, trusting

that God wants no one to perish, and they have imagined a new heaven and a new earth in which they are home in Jerusalem or home with God or home with family. In short, they have practiced hope – disciplined, active hope. And having such hope, they have endured. Faith, hope, and love abide, these three. Yes, the greatest of these is love, but let’s not forget that hope is right up there. Hope sustains them and helps them come through whatever ordeal they have had to bear.

Some will scoff. Hope is wishful thinking. Sacred imagination is nothing more than retreating into fantasy. It’s just make believe like a television sit-com. It is the result of too much Japanese food the night before. Besides, what about the unfulfilled promise of Jesus’ return? The delay in Jesus’ coming again with power and glory was a great source of discouragement to the recipients of the letter we call 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter. The writer counseled patience, and encouraged them again to use their imaginations. *Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish.*

A thousand years equals one day? One day is a thousand years? That’s quite an active imagination. Where did the writer of 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter get such fanciful ideas? Well, we can say he got them from the Psalmist, who says much the same thing in Psalm 90. But where did the Psalmist get them? Einstein was still more than 2,000 years from being born when the Psalmist wrote. No one knew anything about the speed of light, or the theory of relativity. You see, the theory of relativity – which is more than a theory, but a scientific fact – states that time isn’t the absolute we think it is. Here we have ancient Biblical writers expressing the very idea. Even their math seems to be correct.

In his book, *The Fabric of the Cosmos*, the physicist Brian Greene writes that if a spacecraft were to travel into deep space at just under the speed of light, and turn around so that it would return to earth in one day on the ship’s clock, those inside the craft would have aged one day. It makes perfect sense. But what boggles the mind is that the earth to which they would return will have aged one-thousand years.<sup>2</sup> *Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.* It seems to me that those Biblical authors were onto something well ahead of their time, if in fact time means anything at all. It seems to me that when we exercise our sacred imaginations within a community of Christians, empowered by the Spirit, and guided by the tradition, this is hardly a waste of time, but a holy thing to do. Hope is a sacred activity. Indeed, our thoughts and longings are caught up by the Spirit into a timeless realm where Christ is, to merge with the mind of God, even to apprehend truth.

If neither the physicist Brian Greene nor the comedian Bob Newhart do it for you, how about John Donne, the great metaphysical poet of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London? Donne was no stranger to the use of sacred imagination. He wrote a prayer that seems especially appropriate in this season of Advent for those who suspect they may be living in a dream:

Bring us, O Lord God, at our last awakening into the house and gate of heaven to enter into that gate and dwell in that house, where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light; no noise nor silence, but one equal music; no fears nor hopes, but one equal possession; no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity; in the habitation of thy glory and dominion, world without end. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Wright, N.T., *Mark for Everyone*, Westminster Press, 2004, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Greene, Brian, *The Fabric of the Cosmos*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2004, p. 449.