

“The Light You Need For Times Like These”

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There come times in history when so much change is occurring that we just can't absorb all of it. This happens to be one of those times.

If the truth is told, until very recently few people really expected the presidential election to come out the way it did. One of the oldest and best-known civil rights activists, Congressman John Lewis, spoke at length on Tuesday night, Election Night, confessing that never in his dreams had he visualized the election of a black president of the United States. Air time and print time were all but smothered with unending political discussion about that possibility, but now that it has happened, people are still shaking their heads.

This mind-boggling event was preceded only a few days and weeks by remarkable upheavals in what we now call the global financial crisis. That may not have impacted us directly, yet, but we all know that something has happened and wonder how we should respond to it.

Sometimes humor can help us at times like these. I liked the cartoon I saw last week of two wise financial types talking, with one suggesting to the other, “I think the best thing that we can do now, is to—diversify our mattresses.”

Alan Greenspan, perhaps the best-known retired chairman of the Federal Reserve whose autobiography “Age of Turbulence” has been a best-seller, was asked recently in a congressional hearing trying to ferret out what is happening with the economy, “would you say that recent events have caused you to think that your old philosophical mind-sets don't fit what is happening?” And much to my surprise and others, Alan Greenspan had to respond, “Yes, I think you're right. Many of us are going to have to change our theories about the ways the world's financial systems work.” That was an astounding response.

The amazing election of a black president and the almost concurrent and equally dramatic events in the financial world that literally affect how we live and breathe, are but the most dramatic of what I can call major paradigm shifts. I don't think we used that phrase, “paradigm shifts” much about the way we live, until perhaps fifty years ago.

What it simply means is a “transformation of the way we perceive events, people, environments, and life altogether—the way we live our lives today and in the future.”

If you call it a paradigm shift or not, whatever you call it, we are in it. We may not have been shocked by all this as much as we were by the unforgettable events on 9/11-- when people for weeks and months afterward were coming back to church and also reviewing their estate plans-- but it seems to me that this is a time when all of us want to think more seriously about what matters the most to us in life, and how well prepared we are in our minds, hearts, and spirits to respond in healthy ways to the changes that are happening. Is this a time to put our spiritual resources under the mattress, so to speak—even if we diversify the mattresses—or is it a time to discover what Jesus Christ can mean for your life, discover him all over again?

Why do I make that big jump in my thinking? You see, besides the election of a black president and the global financial crisis we know even less about, we're getting close to the beginning of Advent, a new Church Year, right around the corner. The theme of the Gospels this morning, the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Maidens, and next Sunday, The Parable of the servants and how they took care of the Master's money—the parable of the talents-- both have built into them the challenge to be ready, to be alert, to be prepared for the coming of the Lord, whose security and strength we discover all over again with his birth at Bethlehem.

I wish we had more time for discussion of the Gospel parable this morning. If we did it might open up some questions about what it is to be really spiritually wise, in today's world. What does it take to keep our spiritual lamps burning and be ready to discover Jesus Christ, maybe to discover him again as if for the first time?

It's easy to take shots at the foolish maidens. They had an oil shortage. They had wasted the oil that they had and thought that “someone else” might give it to them. They had just not paid attention, drifting off to sleep when their spiritual lamps got dimmer. They had put their lamps under a bushel, as Jesus would say, or put their faith under the mattress as we might say today.

Remember the story about Nasrudin, looking for his keys, who is asked, “where did you lose your keys, Nasrudin, why are you looking here?” and Nasrudin answers, “because that's where the light is.” We're about as confused today as the foolish maidens!

So, actions have consequences, Jesus is saying, so don't keep looking in the wrong place for the light you need. Those who are awake and alert to acknowledge their spiritual need are the ones who will know the gifts of the heavenly banquet. If you think

about it, I suspect that the foolish maidens, on the other hand, will not even know what they missed!

Now, another big jump! In all of the tumult of these tempestuous times, this is also the time of our parish financial campaign. You might expect me to say that in these times of paradigm shifts in values and expectations that we all need the Church, and the Church needs your support. Well, yes. I can say all that because I first found in a parish church the resources that changed my life, and that's why I'm still in a parish church, this really excellent parish environment, St. James. It needs supporting, and it won't be that "someone else." will provide that support. Don't count on it.

But that's NOT the main reason you pledge your money to St. James' You and I pledge our money to God's work because deep in our hearts and souls we all have an oil shortage, we need to be replenishing our spiritual resources from God's abundance. And how does that work? We grow by giving, we grow by offering, we are refreshed and renewed when we find the courage and spiritual strength to let go of dependence on outmoded mindsets and dependence on instant gratifications, that now we're learning we can live without.

What we need now is to learn how to grow by giving, to grow our standard of giving as much as we've been used to growing our standard of living. I suppose we all know the story of Jesus' meeting the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. They have an amazing conversation there which is not really a dialogue because she's talking at one level of her material need for water and Jesus' keeps trying to lift the level of discussion. She wants water for the day, and Jesus is promising the water of life from the eternal wells of God's great abundance. The way to find that eternal abundance is to give it away.

Right square in the middle of one of the most important paradigm shifts of our lifetimes, the liturgical year is also coming to an end, now in the last three weeks of Advent. At this time our thoughts and prayers are with our national leaders, as we move into the defining time for our faith in the God who acts in human history.

The scripture readings these last three weeks can encourage us to reflect on what is permanent and a sure investment for our lives, and what is passing and not worth the investment of our precious energies. I count it a real privilege to think with you about some of the big questions we all have (1) What is the real focus of our lives? (2) What can be taken away? And finally, (3) What do we have that will accompany us and sustain us through life's twists and turns in this shifting world?

Amen