

**WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE MILLENNIUM ?**  
**UU MEETING HOUSE, CHATHAM, MASS.**  
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**Words For Chalice Lighting: O Eternal, take the moments of our lives, the good and the bad, the happy and the sad, and turn them into timeless memoria in the making of our souls, that we may reach beyond things temporal to truths eternal, wherein the holiness and wholeness of life is known and celebrated in all its pain and glory, and whence all beginnings and endings begin and end in thee. Amen.**

Whatever happened to the millennium? You may recall that ten years ago our calendars magically changed from 1999 to the year 2000 thus marking the transition not only into a new year, but into a new decade, a new century, and a new millennium--one year, ten years, a hundred years, a thousand years! That was indeed awesome to contemplate! You will remember that there was a great deal of hoopla and excitement about the transition to the year 2000. The celebrations around the globe were indeed extravagant and colorful, and mixed with both fear and anticipation about what was coming.

Some feared that the transition to Y2K would wreak havoc in our computer systems with a global crash and breakdown of mammoth proportions. It never happened and we and our computerized world adjusted to the change in dates without major incidents. Others on the religious right thought the Second Coming of Christ was surely imminent and that we could all expect messianic movements on the clouds of heaven with Judgment Day not far behind. The clouds of heaven did indeed continue their movements, but no messianic visitors or perturbations were observed.

The celebrations since the year 2000 have been much more restrained in intensity and we are back to celebrating one year at a time, except for some apocalyptic anxiety about the year 2012 (based on ancient Mayan calculations) which I will get to later on in this sermon. But first, "Whatever happened to the millennium?"

There is something to be said, I would argue, for a long-term view of human history. As the Psalmist put it, "a thousand ages in thy sight are like an evening gone." I remember back in 1968 my wife and I took our three boys

to see a movie by science fiction writer, Arthur C. Clarke, and film director, Stanley Kubrick. It was called *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The first showing of the film took place in Boston at a special theater with a curved screen called Cinerama. The curved screen gave more of a sense of depth dimension, not as dramatic as today's Omni Theatre at the Science Center, but certainly an awesome effect in 1968 for a movie about space exploration. The movie fantasized what the world would be like at the beginning of the third millennium.

The film portrayed men and women living on the moon, manned space flights to the planets, the discovery of three strange obelisks left behind by a highly intelligent alien civilization (one on earth, one on the moon and one in orbit around the planet Jupiter), super-intelligent computers that talk and play chess, and dispute with their human masters about the purpose of their mission in space, and then the final scene where astronaut, Frank Bowman, enters the obelisk around Jupiter and is transformed into a Cosmic Star Child.

How close did we come to Arthur C. Clarke's vision of the world for 2001? Not very close, although we did send some successful missions to the moon, now long forgotten, and some unmanned probes to Jupiter, Saturn and Uranus. And we had, maybe still do have, unmanned spacecraft orbiting the planet Mars, mapping its surface, and land rovers scratching its ground seeking for signs of life and clues to its geologic history. But we have yet to discover what it means to be a Cosmic Star Child. The year 2001 sure seemed a long ways away in 1968. But here we are entering the 10th year of the new millennium. Arthur C. Clarke died in 2008 at age 90 in his home in Sri Lanka. And Dick Fewkes at age 73 has happily retired to his house by the Swan Pond River on Cape Cod. Where did those years go?

The word *millennium* derives from the Latin *mille* (thousand) and *ennium* (annual or yearly), thus a thousand years. Of course, the making and keeping of calendars, is a human invention. Nature keeps no calendar and God lives in the dimension of the eternal except for a brief incarnational interlude if the Christian myth be taken literally. Most scholars and historians these days refer to our time as 2009 C.E. (meaning of the Common Era) rather than the Christian designation A.D. (Anno Domini, the year of our Lord). But C.E. or A.D. the reason for our custom of calling the New Year 2010 relates to the date or year in which Jesus of Nazareth was presumably born. We now know that the Gregorian calendar, which was established in 1582,

miscalculated the year of Jesus' birth by four to six years, which means that the millennium by all rights should have begun in 1994 or '96 depending on whether Jesus was born in 4 or 6 B.C. But who's counting?

The use of the designation "the Year of our Lord", A.D., was first established by a little known monk named Dionysius Exiguus, about 500 A.D., to counteract the ancient Roman calendar. Many of the ancient Roman rulers, you will remember, had the gall to designate themselves as gods, and to demand not only obedience from their subjects, but worship as well. That was too much for Christians to swallow and so they refused. Many of them were persecuted and martyred for their refusal, as were the Jews before them, who would give worship only to *Yahweh Adonai*, the Lord God of hosts.

By changing the calendar to *Anno Domini* Christians were saying that no Roman or secular ruler was equal to God or above the God they believed was incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. They affirmed instead that Jesus, not Ceasar, was the Lord of history. Without getting into the Trinitarian-Unitarian controversy about whether and to what degree Jesus was human or divine, we can indeed affirm that no secular or political leader of any nation is above God or the law, or above the ideals of justice and righteousness which apply to all human beings.

That's a very good thing to keep in mind as we enter Barak Obama's 2nd year as President of the United States. The apparent wish to idealize our political or religious leaders needs to be tempered with the reality of our all too human nature, lest our leaders, or their followers, lay overblown expectations upon us. There is only one Lord of History and it ain't Ceasar or the President or Prime Minister or ruler of any nation state.

Among conservative and fundamentalist Christians the Millennium refers not to a specific calendar date, but rather to the thousand-year reign of perfect peace and justice on earth that will occur just before or after the Second Coming of Christ. It all depends on whether you are a *premillennialist* or a *postmillennialist* Christian, not to mention a *dispensationalist*. If you are a ***premillennialist*** you hold that the Millennium cannot begin until the Second Coming of Christ has actually happened. If you are a ***postmillennialist*** you hold to the belief that Jesus will not return until just after the Millennium has been completed.

If you are a *dispensationalist* you believe that all the unfulfilled prophecies of the Old Testament will come true at last during the thousand-year reign of peace and justice. I'll bet you never knew there were so many different kinds of millennialists!

Millennialism is invariably joined with so-called apocalypticism, the belief that the inequities of human history will finally be resolved by supernatural intervention. God and his Messiah will return on the clouds of heaven and set all things aright. The devil will be bound and chained and thrown into the lake of fire along with all those who have followed a sinful and evil path. It sounds very much like a Greek morality play in which the plot is finally resolved not by the characters themselves, but by the intervention of the gods, a *dues ex machina*. It hasn't happened that way yet, and it never will.

All of these millennial views are based on the belief that God's kingdom will come on earth as it is already established in heaven. As a literal belief with a specific date in time and history it can only disappoint. As a symbolic expression of the human longing for a more perfect and just society it can give inspiration for working towards a better world.

Now, a word or two about the hoopla surrounding the End of World scenario related to the year 2012 and the film based on it. I'm inclined to concur with astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson's characterization in the GLOBE of the recent apocalyptic film 2012 as "a hoax by the scientifically illiterate on the scientifically uninformed." It is presumably based on an ancient Mayan calendar that designates December 21, 2012, as the end of a galactic time cycle of 5,125 years in which "the planets of our solar system line up with one another and our sun,...crossing the galaxy's equator and aligning us with the mysterious source of energy that lies at the heart of the Milky Way. This alignment...signals the completion of the (so-called) great cycle." (Gregg Braden, **Fractal Time**, p. 8)

What it all means existentially, mythically or theologically, is anybody's guess, and science cannot say since we are not dealing with science, but a form of religious speculation about cosmic events. It is certainly not about the end of life upon earth as we know it in a reenactment of the Noah's ark legend, as the movie seeks to do. As a disaster movie it is a disaster, but nonetheless a great success at the box office. I will, however, go out on a limb and offer a prediction of my own.

I predict that the day before and the day after December 21, 2012 will not be noticeably different in tone, meaning or significance than December 21, 2009 or 2010. Human beings will continue to seek for meaning in their existence then as now, and the cosmos will neither confirm nor hinder that quest, but will give us the freedom to pursue that meaning in both proximate and ultimate terms, because that is who we are and what we do in our ongoing search to become fully human. We can, however, learn a thing or two about the meaning of time and history from the ancient Greeks, which can help us make sense of our existence.

The ancient Greeks had two concepts of time and history. One was *chronos*, or chronological time, the time that can be measured on a clock, tracked on a calendar, projected on a linear time line. This is the time of learned history, dates, and events, which can be accounted for and even planned. Jesus was born in 6 B.C. The stock market crashed in October 1929. World War II ended in 1945. I turned 73 on the 11th of December. Next month I'll be preaching in N. Easton on the 24<sup>th</sup> of January, and the following month in Bridgewater on the 28<sup>th</sup> of February. This is the time of *chronos*, and we wear it on our wrists, read about it in the newspaper, watch it on television, and write it in our checkbooks.

But the Greeks had a second concept of time, which they called *kairos*, which means the right time, or a time of opportunity, a time of great meaning and significance or challenge. A birthday, an anniversary, a memorial, graduation, marriage, sexual intimacy, giving birth, a job change or a promotion, climbing a mountain, planting roses, being caught up in the beauty of art or music, feeling a connection with God and others in church or in nature, the beginning or ending of a war or major conflict--such events and experiences can be *kairotic*, fraught with meaning, filled with wonder and purpose, turning ordinary time into extraordinary time, transforming *chronos* into *kairos*.

I have shared such moments with my family when I had the pleasure of christening our grandchildren, performing rites of marriage for our children and their children, and passages of remembrance and farewell for my parents and my dear wife. These are not mere dates in a calendar, but meaning changing events which mark the significant passages of our lives. The birth of Jesus of Nazareth was a *kairotic* moment for his parents, Joseph and Mary, and eventually for the course of western civilization, which was changed and transformed by the impact of his life and teachings.

How can we become the instruments of *kairotic* change in our world as Jesus was for his world? How can we turn our *chronos* into *kairos*?

Some years ago we shared Christmas Eve and Christmas Day with our son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren in Needham. We attended the Candlelight service at the First Parish in Needham on Christmas Eve, and then opened presents with the family the following morning. Among other things our three grandchildren each got new scooters. They rode those scooters around the house in a circle through the kitchen, the dining room, the living room and front hallway again and again. Our then 9-year-old granddaughter, Katelyn, the middle child between two brothers, had a big smile on her face. On one of her circles through the living room she exclaimed, "I'm *glad* I was born!"

Wow! What a beautiful affirmation of being for the spirit of Christmas and the New Year, and yes, the millennium. Every Child of the Universe deserves the gift of being able to say to themselves, "I'm *glad* I was born!" To feel that and to say that is truly to turn *chronos* into *kairos*. As the poet Max Ehrman put it, in spite of the pain and struggle, "You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars, you have a right to be here." You have inherent worth and dignity. Your life has meaning and significance.

*Kairos* can be both personal and global in extent and meaning. Many said that following the events of 9-11-01 we will never be the same again as a people and a nation. That is probably true. We lost our innocence but perhaps gained an appreciation for the gift of life and love and freedom that we have too often taken for granted.

If the first war of the new millennium, as former President Bush called our engagement with terrorism at home and abroad, makes us a better people and nation, more intent on justice and peace for all peoples, not just for ourselves, and helps us realize that we need other people and the support of other nations to accomplish great ends, then we will have turned our *chronos* into *kairos*, and turned suffering and loss into moral and spiritual gain for ourselves and the world. But if we make war by pre-emptive strikes against enemies and cultures we do not really understand then we run the risk of turning our *kairos* into *chronos*, resulting in suffering and loss of meaning for all concerned.

That's what I think the existential concern about dates and changes in years and millenniums is really all about. We are seeking an ultimate meaning to our existence behind the changing and transitory nature of our time and history. We are creatures of *chronos* who hunger for *kairos*. As we enter into the second decade of the greatest chronological change since the beginning of the first millennium, we ask ourselves, what is the meaning of the human venture on this planet among the stars? What can we do with the time God has given us to make this global village into a haven of love and peace and friendship? How can we help to bring about the day when every human being will be able to affirm for themselves and others, "I'm glad I was born, and I'm glad you were born."

Whatever happened to the millennium? The answer lies within each and everyone of us as we engage in the project of turning our *chronos* into *kairos*, here and now, and everywhere. This is the challenge that awaits us in this the completion of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and in all the days and years yet to come. May we welcome the challenge of those years with courage, hope and determination, to better serve our God, our dreams, and one another. So may it be. Amen.