

Christoph Keller, III  
St. Margaret's Episcopal Church  
January 4, 2009

“Beware of Dogma.”

Every morning I drive to work across the main street bridge to my office in North Little Rock. There's a large billboard on the bridge. All December, leading up to Christmas, it said in big, gothic, religious looking print: “Beware of Dogma.” (This is message brought to you by the foundation for “Freedom from Religion.”)

I thought of that when reading this morning's collect from the Book of Common Prayer.

“O God who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored the dignity of human nature, Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity, your son Jesus Christ.”

Let's count the dogmas in that prayer. That there is dignity in human nature, wonderfully created, one. That this dignity has been damaged, yet more wonderfully restored, two and three. That in Christ God has humbly taken on our human nature, four. And five: that in Christ humanity is raised, to share in the life of God.

Dogmas, you see, are like witches in the Land of Oz. There are bad ones: false and cruel and ugly. And there are good ones: beautiful, and kind, and true.

Our dogmatic view of human nature is a lovely case in point. It means that whoever you are, whatever you've done, here we place an extremely high value on your inherent dignity and worth.

Now lets think a little more on what it means to be a human being.

We are animals, yes, first cousin to the chimpanzee. We have evolutionary science to thank for that disclosure. But we are animals of a special kind: rational and spiritual.

We are “rational animals”—like Aristotle said. Creatures who think. We possess this God-like capacity to question, reason and to understand.

So...we come to church and hear a story of wise men from the east, following a star. Our reasoning kicks in. Our nature is to ask: what are we to make of this? Is this story true? How do we interpret it?

Let's take just a moment then to think on *that*.

The Science Channel ran a show last month called “The Star of Bethlehem.” I saw it recommended by the Wall Street Journal, so I tuned in. I'm glad I watched. The very first scene, they showed General Theological Seminary in New York, from which come

hell or high water I plan to graduate in May. They interviewed Professor Deirdre Good, a friend of mine, who teaches there. They asked Professor Good what kind of truth this story of the magi is intended to convey. Her answer seemed to downplay the possibility that the story depicts a literal, historical event. To her expert eye the truth in this story lies in the values it conveys, and perhaps in the mystery it expresses. Deirdre would speak for many faithful scholars who call this story a symbolic, picturesque depiction of the truth that in this humblest of births, the world's true and only king has come.

So that is one, eminently reasonable interpretation.

I was a little bit surprised, this being the Science Channel, to find the other experts on this show giving the reasonable basis for a more literal interpretation. A young, articulate, attractive English priest said that she definitely thinks the story of the magi is based on a physical, literal event. A series of well-credentialed and seemingly reputable astronomers took turns presenting plausible scenarios involving astronomical events—comets, exploding stars, strange alignments of the planets (Jupiter and Saturn) that did in fact occur around the birth of Christ, and that would have attracted the attention of expert star gazers in the east, and that could have drawn them to the child in Bethlehem.

I admit that like the second line of interpretation better. “Faith’s dearest child is miracle,” as Goethe said. But authentic Christian faith can live on either interpretation. In fact I say that in my General Seminary dissertation. This is me: Chapter 5, page 317.

Faith requires a literal or otherwise concrete interpretation of some parts of the biblical account. Solid science necessitates a non-literal interpretation of others. For science’s sake, the story of Adam and Eve must receive a non-literal interpretation. That fact can establish one end of a range. As a matter of core concern for Christians, the passion-resurrection narrative must have a concrete meaning. That gives the other end of the range. The Christmas narrative falls somewhere along the spectrum between those two poles. Science, arguably, does not exclude a literal interpretation of it. Nor, arguably, does authentic faith require one.

End quote.

As rational animals, that is the kind of thing we do. We give ourselves a range of faithful, reasonable possibilities to ponder, and discuss. It is the human mind in action: the greatest known wonder of the universe, making sense of faith. Faith cannot dispense with rationality. Creatures like us can no more stop ourselves from reasoning than a bee can stop itself from making honey, or a bird dog can stop itself from pointing birds. We’ve been wonderfully created for just that very thing.

We are rational animals, you and I. But faith doesn’t live by rationality alone. For we are spiritual creatures too. That means moral: aware that there are better ways to live than others, and free to choose the them. And that we are spiritual also means that we

have a capacity for intercourse and intimacy with God. We have been wonderfully created, wonderfully restored, for that as well.

Having now shared a little sample from my dissertation, my rationality at work, doing the best it can, I am also moved to share from a recent spiritual experience. It was a dream, a beautiful dream in the midst of an unforgettably sad and difficult month. I should tell you in advance it ends with a slightly disturbing, painful image. There should be no shock in that: When I went to sleep that night, “disturbed and pained” was exactly how I felt. This was December 8, a Monday night.

*In my dream, it is Easter Sunday morning. I find myself in a large Anglo-Catholic Church, milling around before the service. I am there to worship, not to lead. Priests are walking here and there, hands-folded, a little over-pious to my taste, but happy. I try to remember to fold my hands like they do. The church is well-kept, everything in good repair and splendid order. Groups of women in their Easter finest, hats with flowers, are clustered around baptismal fonts. They too are happy. I wander out into the courtyard, where the procession will soon begin. The grass outside is fresh and green, but most of it is covered by a pool of water. It must have been a rainy spring. In a corner there is a group of prancing girls, practicing their steps, high-stepping just like at Central High. I like that. Then I see a ripple in the water. I watch, and from the water there emerges a bishop, robed in blue, a happy, youthful, smiling, strong and handsome bishop, carrying his staff, and dripping wet from head to toe. And after the Bishop, more movement in the water, and out comes, row by row, a choir, a large, wet, smiling, ever-growing choir. And then the choir lets loose a string of sharp, piercing, alleluias. And the alleluias begin to gloriously reverberate from the walls around the courtyard and the church. And the choir continues to grow, as new ranks emerge from underneath the water, wet, happy, singing alleluia. Then I hear a member of the choir, looking back into the pool of water, saying out loud to no-one in particular: “I’m glad I’m out of there and done with that. There were dead deer all over the place down there.” Then I saw one: a doe lying beautiful but lifeless on the grass.*

I woke up. It was Tuesday morning.

Here’s my thought about the deer. For several weeks at that point my life had become increasingly preoccupied with dear ones who were dying, and now one of them was gone. Four days earlier we’d had services for Marion Kingdon in Charlottesville, a person dear to me, mother of my godchild, daughter of my late, best friend. Marion was half the story. The other half was Peggy, just as dear to me, and to all of you, and also dying. In fact I had an appointment to see her that Tuesday morning.

What I didn’t know when I went to sleep that Monday night was that Peggy and I were about to have our last conversation ever, and that it would be a talk about the meaning of our faith in Resurrection.

With that dream, it was as though God didn't want to send me in to such an important conversation empty-handed. So for our last-ever theological discussion, I simply told Peggy what I'd dreamt the night before.

Rational creatures that we are, we'll want to ask: What's the use of dreams for theological discussion? As Scrooge said to the ghost of Jacob Marley, "You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blob of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of underdone potato." One could reasonably hypothesize that my vivid dream was no more than the spasm of a riven heart trying to wring some comfort from an agonizing situation.

I think that hypothesis is wrong. It's a theory spun from a dogma that I don't believe in, the dogma that that life comes from nothing and comes to nothing in the end. "The Cosmos is all that is, or was, or ever will be," as Carl Sagan so succinctly put it. Now there's a dogma to beware of!

Please don't think that I suppose that God has given me a glimpse, literally, of heaven. I don't know what heaven looks like, but I devoutly doubt it looks anything like church! We don't need to know what heaven looks like, or what people do there. It's reasonable to think that it's a life analogous to this one: familiar somehow, while altogether different. And that's the impression given by the Bible in the resurrection stories, and especially by St. Paul. If there was ever anyone on earth who knew what heaven looked like, it would be Paul, and it is still astonishing to me that we can pick up a book and read his letters.

We don't need to know the details of life hereafter. We just need to appreciate the richness of our hope: I pray," Paul writes, "that . . . the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints."

I believe that's my favorite passage in the Bible. I love its image of the human heart, wonderfully created, and now yet more wonderfully restored, with eyes enlightened. Our hearts can "see."

The Spirit brightens the eyes of our hearts with images of Easter, and of Christmas. Christmas is our window into the truth that God is with us, not only in the spirit, but in the flesh. With wise men who have journeyed from the east following a star, we see the Lord of all Creation in a child, nursing at his mother's breast. Easter is our window into the truth that death is not the end for him, this child become a man and crucified: not for him, and not for us.

It is not the end. It is the next chapter in our story. And it begins with "alleluia."

