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1 Advent (A)

"Wake up." Bedside, St. Paul turns on the lamp, one click. The sleeper cracks an eyelid. "Wake up," he says again. "The night is far gone, the day is near."

This reminds me of the Buddha. When someone asked him what he was, he said: "I am awake."

Of course, Paul and Buddha had different understandings of "awake." Paul was thinking about Christ and Buddha wasn't. They may or may not have had similar understandings of "asleep," but I am sure that they agreed that, even when the sun is shining, our world is deeply shadowed. Paul said "the whole creation has been groaning in travail." Buddha's first noble truth was that life is *dukkha*, which means painful.

Buddha's solution was an eightfold path to liberation, a middle way between self-denial and enjoyment. Maybe that is why Episcopalians like him, especially, it sometimes seems, our women. Walker Percy mentions this throughout his novels. Binx Bolling's aunt in *The Moviegoer* is representative. Binx says: "My aunt likes to say she is an Episcopalian by emotion, a Greek by nature and a Buddhist by choice."¹

As Episcopalians, we have often claimed to represent a middle way, the *via media* we call it, between extremes. We're neither puritans nor playboys. We keep Mardi-Gras and Lent in balance. "Moderation" is our way of being wakeful.

I finally got around to reading Tom Wolfe's novel *I Am Charlotte Simmons*. Charlotte is beautiful and brilliant, the pride of her dirt-poor Appalachian mountain family. I think Jennifer Lawrence would play her in the movie. Charlotte is a freshman at DuPont, a fictional elite northeastern school with Harvard's academic standing, Princeton's student social profile, and basketball success resembling Duke's. DuPont is meant to represent the cream.

Charlotte's mother is a loving, but uncompromising, hard shell country Christian, puritan rather than Episcopalian. After moving Charlotte in, she leaves her with a warning and reminds her who and what she is.

There's gon' be folks here wanting you to do thangs you don't hold with ... 'So you jes' remember you come from mountain folks We know how to be real stubborn. Can't nobody make us do a thang once we get hard set against it. And if anybody don't like that, you don't have to explain a thang to'm. All you got to say is, 'I'm Charlotte Simmons, and I don't hold with things like at.' And they'll respect you.

The problem is, they don't. In Romans, Paul lists some things that Charlotte doesn't hold with and finds rampant at DuPont: reveling and drunkenness, debauchery, licentiousness, quarreling and jealousy. Stubborn, she resists. "I am Charlotte Simmons," she remembers. But resistance doesn't get respect and she is miserable and lonely. "People need people," my father loved to say, quoting the corny song, "and people who have people are the luckiest people in the world." Charlotte needs friends and appreciation.

The problem is, the people from whom she needs it are beautiful but sour, and too shallow to appreciate a mountain girl who marches to a different drummer. What the men and women of DuPont appreciate in Charlotte is her beauty. The women jealously respect it. The men are drawn like moths to flame.

Charlotte takes the apple. Afterwards, Eve-like, she avoids her perceptive mother and tries to hide her shame. As the story closes, Charlotte Simmons is the toast of campus and in pain.

Wake up, Charlotte. (Click). "The night is far gone, the day is near."

Let's talk about the Second Coming.

Jesus speaks of separation: of two standing in the field, one will be taken and one will be left. He says not to pay attention to the television preachers who believe they know when it will happen: "About that day and hour no one knows," not even him. Expect the unexpected: like a thief in the night, the Son of Man will come. So be ready: wakeful.

What are we to make of these apocalyptic promises and warnings?

In part, we know they're true. We know that each of us will die and that death may arrive like a thief at an unexpected hour. One is taken; one is left. Any good lawyer will tell us all the ways we need to be prepared. We also know the sun and earth are perishable, and the universe itself won't last forever. Science is full of apocalyptic warnings, without promises.

The Bible folds its warnings within promises.

It paints a vivid picture: Both the warnings: *The Sun became black as sackcloth . . . and the moon became as blood; and the stars of heaven fell unto the earth* (Rev. 6:12). And the promises: *And the sea . . . and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged . . . according to [their] works.* (Rev. 20:13) *And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven . . . and I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men . . . and God shall wipe away all tears . . . and there shall be no more death, nor sorrow . . . nor pain . . . for the former things are passed away.* (Rev. 21;2-4)

Marcus Borg, the influential scholar, advises us to take the Bible seriously, not literally. If he would say “we should always take the Bible seriously, though not always literally,” then I could agree. Sometimes seriousness requires the literal interpretation. Jesus’ death on a cross is an obvious example; his resurrection, too, in my opinion.

What about the Second Coming?

Richard Hooker, the great Elizabethan theologian, advised that taking scripture seriously means reading it in faith, with reason. At points, the Bible’s interpretation is uncertain. At these points, reason looks for guidance from elsewhere in the Bible where the meaning is more clear. Light a candle from the campfire at the center, take it with you to see a little better in the woods.

The Bible opens with a story of the world’s creation in the book of Genesis. It closes with the Book of Revelation’s promise of a Second Coming.

The Second Coming is the woods: the interpretation is uncertain. Time was, that was also true of Genesis. St. Augustine himself wasn’t sure how literally to take it. He could entertain several faithful interpretations of creation, both literal and not, including one that resembles evolution. Wisely, he cautioned readers not to stake our faith on only one interpretation. In Galileo’s conflict with the Pope, Galileo took his stand on Augustine.

Since Galileo, we turn to science, not scripture, for a literal description of the world’s beginning. So has science replaced the Book of Genesis? No, because the process science describes doesn’t touch the deeper meaning of the word “creation.”

Let’s place ourselves within the novel *I am Charlotte Simmons*.

Suppose we are friends of Charlotte. One morning over coffee, we ask her how she got here. She tells us how her parents met and fell in love, and of their marriage. We ask for more. She tells us where her people came from going back to Europe, why they left, and how they found their way to Appalachia. We ask for more. Drawing from biology, she takes the story back through evolution to the origin of species and speculation about the dawn of life. That would be a literal and accurate description from within the novel.

Now we’re back outside the book.

Living as we do beyond the story, we know there is another truth about the Genesis of Charlotte Simmons that does not unfold within the pages of the novel. It is the story of the book as such, about who wrote it and with what purposes in mind. Charlotte doesn’t know this other story. She doesn’t see Tom Wolfe, in whom she lives and moves and has her being.

Within this realm we now inhabit, the Bible is the story of our author, in whom we live and move and have our being. Unlike Tom Wolfe, and by our author's choice, he appears within in our story though he lives beyond it. In speaking of the author and the world beyond the book, the story cannot be a literal description. Words, concepts and events from within the covers are stretched to speak about this all-encompassing reality.

This is why there is no conflict between creation as depicted in the Book of Genesis and the science of evolution. Karl Barth said it:

One can as little compare the Biblical creation story and a scientific theory like that of evolution as one can compare, shall we say, an organ and a vacuum cleaner [The] creation story is a witness to the beginning or becoming of all reality distinct from God in the light of God's later acts and words relating to his people, Israel—naturally in the form of a saga or poem. The theory of evolution is an attempt to explain the same reality in its inner nexus, naturally in the form of a scientific hypothesis.

What is true of the Old Testament's description of the world's beginning is true of the New Testament's descriptions of its end. The form is poetic, symbolic: words, concepts and events are stretched to speak of truths beyond the reach of our imagination. And the basis is God's "acts and words relating to his people Israel," at the center of which we find the story of his Son, the story in which the meaning from beyond the covers is disclosed within.

We don't know when, or where, or how, our story ends. We know that when it ends, our lives aren't over. We know there is another story, that opens on that world beyond these pages, a world that even here we've had a glimpse and taste of, and know as fascinating, beautiful and good.

¹ *The Moviegoer*, 284.