

Jan Hus Presbyterian Church & Neighborhood House  
The Second Sunday of Advent  
December 5, 2010

Sermon Notes:  
“What tickles the back of your mind?”  
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Back in September of 2008, I was still teaching high school in the Ossining Public Schools system. I had been a special ed teacher for math for almost six years, and because of scheduling needs, I was also given a science inclusion class. In our district, an inclusion class meant that about 1/3 of the class were kids who had exceptionalities but were expected to succeed in a regular ed class setting, with some support, which in this case included lead science teacher, me, and an aide.

What caught my eye in that early part of the school year was the project taking place on – actually – under the Franco-Swiss border with a circumference of some 28 km or 17 miles. CERN- The European Organization for Nuclear Research had imagined, designed, and created the Large Hadron Collider (LHC), whose purpose was to accelerate and then impact lead ions to recreate the conditions just after the Big Bang. The information they hoped to learn from the experiment would allow physicists to study a state of matter known as quark-gluon plasma, which is believed to have existed soon after the Big Bang and the beginning of the universe some 12 – 14 billion years ago, about 8 billion years before the solar system formed out of its energy and force.

In a way, it is a time machine, looking back billions of years.

Eventually, what scientists hope to find out is how certain elements and forces that existed at that time just after the Big Bang might provide us with a deeper understanding of the laws of physics, as we know them today.

It may prove to be more than they wish to know.

At certain times in life, at least in my own experience, everything is placed on the table. For scientists, experiments do exactly that. Because such scientists *need* to be faithful to their profession, instead of ignoring that “tickle in the back of their head” that said, “You know, there may be more here than you know...” instead of ignoring that and clamping down on the information they could prove and insist was certain, correct...end of story...they risked it all to find out more about the +1. The more that is always there...

It may be next year before the LHC is up to speed and some of the results begin to be known (or unknown)...

As we await whatever information may emerge from this amazing foray into the work of quarks-gluons and such, there have been some stunning results this week that did emerge from testing at NASA that upended the world of biology. In short, a new life-form has been discovered in a bacteria that feeds on arsenic – yes the poison of kings and poets and philosophers.

A bit of biology:

There are six main elements that are the fundamental building blocks of life. SPONCH is the mnemonic, and describes them in order from least to most common:

Sulphur, Phosphorous, Oxygen, Carbon, and Hydrogen.

Do you notice something missing?

Arsenic. The bacteria studied in the NASA labs, essentially replaced phosphorous with arsenic, upending life, as we thought we knew it. Among other things, this means that one of the reasons we may not have discovered “life” in other parts of the universe is that we were “looking in all the wrong places,” seeking the “six” building blocks of life that matched our understanding alone.

The “tickle” in the back of these scientists’ heads that pushed them to a place that no one else had looked in a world where we too often think everything has been discovered... has taken us, literally, one step closer to Star Trek, like the Horta people whose lives were based in silicon instead of carbon.

+1, +1, +1....

You know, this is cool stuff, but there a problem with the following that “nudging or tickle.” It requires a risk. Sometimes a whole series of risks; sometimes some very big ones.

In our compartmentalized sort of society, we’re really not taught, as in school, to take risks. We study those who do, but encouraged....? Not usually. Instead, we assume and assign risks based on our own levels of comfortability. We go just so far – and sometimes so little that there is no risk, at all. We don’t want to put our lives in harm’s way, so we *specialize* risk-taking: we *commission* police, military, etc. to do our work. This morning we wake up here and soldiers wake up in war zones. We’re comfortable, they’re at risk.

In the military, as in the church, people who are LGBT are asked to be quiet about who they are – lie, in other words. Some are willing to take the risk of being out and vocal to change things, while others look towards those taking the risks for the work to be done to make it safe, supporting them however they can.

We, too often, I think, see risk-taking as a spectator sport from surfing to sky-diving. Ever wonder why Xtreme sports are so popular? For some, it's a vicarious way of taking the risks ourselves.

Maybe, in one way, that's why the Bible has such a following. It's filled with risk-takers; it's all about risk-takers...the one's who could not ignore the tickle, the nudge, the call...in spite of the fear or danger - and we have their stories. Stories of what people were willing to do – to be at risk for their faith and what they saw as their mission.

Last week, I asked you about your mission. Asked you to think about what *your* mission was. I'm sure you all gave that a great deal of thought. This Sunday, the question that comes to mind is,

“What are you (we) willing to do in this season of actively waiting, this Advent, what are we willing to risk – or what have we already risked – to move in the direction of our mission?

As the cover of the bulletin says...

What are we willing to risk – either by following the “nudge” or not? What do we lose, if we always let others lead the way?

In all the science of the week, which by the way I find no way in conflict with anything in religion, in all the science, I had this image of a pregnant universe. God, in ways we just can't understand, sending one to this planet filled with more life than we know, sending perhaps the most well-known risk taker of all, born with a tickle that called him to the mission of preparing a way to God, a way of peace and love. Without a road map, without knowing the risks, just willing to take them...

So much of this we just can't understand. The answers are as unknown to us as the elements we have yet to find or the next of life forms waiting to peek through our ignorance and sometimes arrogance.

Mostly, though, we miss *knowing* because what we are looking for is not “out there.”

The longings of the prophets and the teachings of Jesus all tell us the same thing. It's an inside job, this business of love and peace. Maybe that's why it's a tickle in the back of the head.

Seems to me, it's worth the risk to follow. In itself, that may be another form of life!