

“The Place Where God’s Dice Are Hidden”
A homily by Ethan Jewett for the people of St. Nicholas
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I Samuel 3:1-10 + Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18 + I Corinthians 6:12-20 + John 1:43-51

Science fiction posits a humanity of infinite possibilities, which is perhaps why both scientists and theologians are big fans. In many ways, it bridges the divide between science and religion by finding a common vocabulary to explain the mystery and hope of the greatest human aspirations. Popular physicist, Stephen Hawking, has mused that “God not only plays dice, He also sometimes throws the dice where they cannot be seen.” It is this place that cannot be seen that intrigues both the person of faith and the person of science. In Christianity, the exploration of this hidden place is the role of the prophet, and indeed, science fiction is full of prophets that have much to teach us religious folk. So, I’ll begin with a short scene from one of my favorite classics of science fiction, the Dune chronicles.

The preacher chose the early morning of the day to appear once more in the plaza of Alia’s temple, defying the order for his arrest which everyone knew had been issued. [. . .] Taking his stance on the third of the Temple’s steps, The Preacher waited for the hush to come. When silence had spread like a wave through the throng and the hurrying footsteps of others come to listen could be heard at the plaza’s limits, he cleared his throat. [. . .] He felt the grey hush of the great square as he began to speak.

[. . .]

“You, Priest in your mufti,” The Preacher called, “you are a chaplain to the self-satisfied. I come not to challenge Muad’Dib but to challenge you! Is your religion real when it costs you nothing and carries no risk? Is your religion real when you fatten upon it? Is your religion real when you commit atrocities in its name? Whence comes your downward degeneration from the original revelation? Answer me, Priest!”

[. . .]

The Preacher [then] aimed his empty sockets at Alia, spoke intimately, but with a voice which carried across the throng.

“Muad’Dib showed you two things: a certain future and an uncertain future. With full awareness, he confronted the ultimate uncertainty of the larger universe. He stepped off *blindly* from his position in the world. He showed us that men must do this always, choosing the uncertain instead of the certain.”

The passage I just read depicts the blind, God-Emperor, Muad’Dib, returning to his capital on the planet Dune. Disguised as an itinerant preacher, he decries the corrupt messianic cult he and his sister Alia worked to build. The language is clearly steeped in the Western prophetic tradition of Tiresias, Jeremiah,

and John the Baptist, not to mention Jesus himself. Although blind, the Preacher is able to see what the priests and people are not. Religion has become a sham, a tool of oppression and corruption. It has ceased to be prophetic, because its leaders are too invested in preserving their power and avoiding risks. It takes an outsider to wake people from their stupor of complacency and conformity to hear the dangerous truth that nothing is certain and the future is unwritten. Reality, as they know it, is but one option among many.

Prophets, like the Preacher, are liminal creatures. They live in the in-between places, straddling the expanse between humanly contrived divisions. In time, they inhabit a space between the now and several future paths, where divine will and free will are held in constant tension; they signify the ontological intersection of the human and divine; and socio-political systems view them as subversive elements that stand between established power and the powerless. The liminality of prophets is, understandably, hard for many people to bear, because it calls our accepted reality into question. Physicists like Einstein and Bohr, Hawking and Kaku, for example, have reconceived the physical world through quantum mechanics and string theory. Prophets, whether religious or scientific, ask us to set aside our understanding of ourselves and the universe, and reconstruct reality along different lines.

Obi-Wan Kenobi, another sage of science fiction, warned, “Your eyes can deceive you, don’t trust them,” while Jesus hints to Nathanael in today’s Gospel that if he only believes what he sees, he ain’t seen nothing yet. There’s no denying the limits of our physical senses. Prophetic perception, which picks up where they leave off, is achieved through concentrated spiritual work. Guided by the Holy Spirit, we quiet our physical senses and learn to discern an inner life moved by the breath of God. Ignatians call this *disponibility*, a posture of receptiveness, availability, or readiness to receive the voice of God. It is in this state of readiness that Samuel responds, “Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.”

Like the Preacher in *Dune*, whose prophetic sight compensates for his empty eye sockets, the blind Eli perceives God with a hearing beyond the limited human sense. Reality is altered through this expanded, nuanced awareness. Phyllis Tickle argues that the individual’s openness to the revelations of the Holy Spirit is part of a postmodern, posthuman re-construction of reality, similar to what physicists have done for the natural world. This re-construction is nothing less than a revolution in the notion of “self”. It amounts to exploring the self’s uncertain future in Muad’Dib’s uncertain universe. Tickle observes that

“This [revolution is] in your face, up close, and personal, because this one taunts every one of us . . . who are you, there in the mirror? . . . what are

you, human or machine, agent and actor or puppet and victim? . . . how do you know? . . . what does it mean, this “knowing” thing? . . . how do you know you know? . . . yoo-hoo, who’s in there and where?”

In the Dune universe, Muad’Dib represents the fulfillment of the self’s potential. His coming serves as a palpable sign that human development has moved beyond genetically defined limits. Selective breeding, mental conditioning, and use of the consciousness-altering spice, *mélange*, have expanded exponentially the horizons of human awareness. Holy Scripture proposes a similarly grandiose destiny for humanity. Great prophets, from Isaiah and Jeremiah to St. Paul and Gandhi and Martin Luther King, have embraced an unborn reality where the captives are set free, the hungry are fed, and peace reigns in Creation. This radical, vatical vision, so seemingly out of reach, emerges as a possible reality, at the moment we accept the future as unwritten. Space travel, the fall of apartheid, and the mapping of the human genome were born in such moments.

For the prophet, the individual’s and the universe’s futures are aligned. The questions that Tickle identifies with the revolution of the self determine the shape of the world to come. As we engage the Holy Spirit in our discernment of who we are becoming (values, hopes, fears, gifts), we are encouraged by God to advance from our inner state of readiness to prophetic living. In hearing God’s voice, we

are bidden to reply, "Here I am, for you called me," as Samuel does, and to heed through action the truth that is revealed to us. Active disponibility requires us to condition our souls, minds, and bodies to living in liminal space, by prayerfully attending to the immediate demands of the present and the distant beckoning of the future, as if they were equally real. May we each learn to hear what is deaf to our ears, to see what is invisible to our eyes, and to risk exploring the place within ourselves where God's dice are hidden.

Amen.