

WHERE WE MAKE OUR STAND

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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The American poet Katherine Lee Bates, whose poem “America the Beautiful” provides words for our most American hymn, begins her poem “The New Year”:

*Long foretold by those prophets old,
The sun the moon and the stars,
The New Year waits at Time's high gates
And clashes the golden bars;
And the soul of the world awakens and gropes
In a twilight wonder of fears and hopes,
As a new wave breaks on the beaten shores,
And a new foot falls on the trodden floors
And a New Year stands with uplifted hands
In the light of the opened doors.*

Yesterday was the twelfth day after Christmas. According to an ancient legend based on stories in the New Testament, the three kings arrived in Bethlehem on the twelfth day after Jesus' birth. They found the infant child in a stable and presented him with gifts. Many Christians around the world, especially those from Orthodox and Hispanic traditions, now celebrate the twelfth day after Christmas as Three Kings Day.

The New Testament says that the three kings — also known as wise men or magi — had seen an unusually bright star in the sky on the evening Jesus was born. These were learned men who looked into the heavens for clues to the meaning of events on earth, their craft a jumble of what we today call astronomy and astrology.

What exactly did they see? Some scholars propose that the magi saw an exploding star, or supernova; others suggest they saw a comet, perhaps even Halley's Comet. Still others focus on the conjunction of Venus and Jupiter. According to the calculations of modern astronomers, the brightest planets in the sky, Venus and Jupiter, would have appeared to merge into a dazzling star-like beacon at about the time Jesus is thought to have been born. By some estimates, a conjunction this bright hadn't occurred for at least 2,000 years prior to Jesus' birth and hasn't occurred since.

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When the deep-space probe Voyager 1 reached the edge of our solar system a dozen or so years after it was launched in 1976, NASA engineers wanted to turn the spacecraft's cameras off to conserve energy, so the probe could continue to send data back to Earth in the years ahead. The cosmologist Carl Sagan, who had curated a collection of songs and messages that were pressed onto a golden phonograph record to be carried by Voyager into deep space, wanted the spacecraft to take one final photograph of Earth. The engineers protested that the distance would be too great and the resolution too low for the photograph to have any value. But Sagan persisted, and eventually he persuaded NASA to have the photograph taken.

The result, which Voyager took on Valentine's Day in 1990 from a distance of more than 4 billion miles, became the iconic image Sagan dubbed the "Pale Blue Dot." The photograph looks remarkably unremarkable. Unless someone points out the dot and tells you what it is, you would never know it was a planet — much less planet Earth. In his book *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space*, Sagan writes:

From this distant vantage point, the Earth might not seem of any particular interest. But for us, it's different. Consider again that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every 'superstar,' every 'supreme leader,' every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there — on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

*And the soul of the world awakens and gropes
In a twilight wonder of fears and hopes...*

Sagan adds:

Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity — in all this vastness — there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves. The Earth is the only world known, so far, to harbor life. There is nowhere else, at least in the near future, to which our species could migrate. Visit, yes. Settle, not yet. Like it or not, for the moment, the Earth is where we make our stand.

There is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves. The Earth is where we will make our stand.

Last August, the essayist Lindy West, author of the book *Shrill: Notes from a Loud Woman*, wrote an opinion column in the New York Times that has haunted me ever since. Writing after white nationalists and neo-Nazis had marched in Charlottesville, she observes how easy it is for white people to denounce Nazis and white supremacists. “Here’s what’s actually important,” she says — and this is the line that haunts me: “White people, this is all being done in your name. If you don’t want it, prove it.”

“If you truly repudiate this march and this violence,” she says, “then repudiate mass incarceration and private prisons... Repudiate gun-control obstructionism. Repudiate the Muslim ban. Repudiate the wall. Repudiate anti-abortion legislation... Repudiate environmental deregulation... Repudiate homophobia and transphobia.” And so on. If you are white, West insists, this is all being done in your name. If you don’t want it, prove it.

It occurs to me that this same principle can be applied to handwringing in the face of many other forms of bad behavior. Harvey Weinstein and other men who conducted themselves in similar ways have done what they have done in the name of male privilege. If you are male, as I am, this is being done in your name. Donald Trump has said the things he has said as president and done the things that he has done in the name of the United States of America. If you’re American, as I am, this is being done in your name. Industrial food production and processing, with its devastating impact on the environment, on animals, and on human bodies, is being done in the name of everyone who buys and eats the results. If you shop in grocery stores and eat in restaurants, as I do, this is being done in your name. And so on.

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James Fallows, a longtime and prolific writer for the Atlantic, posted a blog several days ago titled “It’s Been an Open Secret All Along.” He begins with a look back at the initial reports about Harvey Weinstein’s pattern of sexual aggressiveness and abuse. He notes that one of the initial responses to the behavior of Weinstein and others was that the behavior in question had been an open secret all along. This was reflexively offered as an explanation, even a rationalization. Everybody knew it was going on, and if you were smart and especially if you were female, Fallows says, you kept your distance.

Fallows goes on to make the same point about Michael Wolff’s new book *Fire and Fury*, which claims that everyone around the current president, even his closest advisers, considers him unfit for the office. As Wolff puts it, “They all — 100% — came to believe he was incapable of functioning in his job.”

Time will tell what percentage of Michael Wolff’s incendiary accusations and observations turn out to be true. In the meantime, Fallows observes that people who

know open secrets have something in common: “They know. They could act. And they don’t.”

Whatever the so-called open secret, it’s being done in the name of everyone who knows about it. If we know, it’s being done in our name. If we don’t want it, we need to prove it.

In her poem “The New Year,” Katherine Lee Bates continues:

*Long foretold, in the morning cold,
With pain and music and mirth
The New Year gleams on the broken dreams
Of the fast-revolving earth;
A secret, a change, and a mystery,
What hath not been and what is to be,
Nourished and cherished and hidden away,
Saved by Time for this ripening day,
To work a deed forever decreed
And a mission it must obey.*

The New Year casts the broken dreams of our fast-revolving earth in a new light, the poet says. The secrets about what’s hidden in the past and the mystery of how the past will be transformed in the future — these secrets and mysteries have been saved by time for this evolving day. They have been saved to work a deed and pursue a mission. Our responsibility in this New Year, the poet concludes, is to be obedient to that mission.

On these terms, the proof that we have taken responsibility for what’s being done in our name is not that the broken dreams of this earth have been mended. It’s not that the mystery of how we create a better future has fully been revealed. Rather, it’s that we have worked the deed that is ours to work. It’s that we have been obedient to the mission that is ours to pursue.

The Talmud, as the oral tradition of rabbinic Judaism is known, urges us: “Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now.” The Talmud adds, “You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.”

*As a new wave breaks on the beaten shores,
And a new foot falls on the trodden floors
And a New Year stands with uplifted hands
In the light of the opened doors.*