

ADVENT, ANTS, AND ASPENS

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on the Second Sunday of Advent, December 6, 2015

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Another World Is Possible

There's a woman by the name of Jamie Walter who attends church here now and then and lives in the greater Binghamton area. She's a spiritual teacher and consultant. Unable to be with us today, she's on the phone with somebody in India this morning.

Jamie has a blog that she publishes more than once a week called "Sophia's Child," which I dearly love for two reasons: One is just the raw content of the blog. It's always worth your time to read what she has to say. Two is that she integrates artwork into her spiritual teaching, which is easier said than done.

So I'm reading one of her posts and along comes this image. It's called "A Bridge in the Woods" by Rafail Levitsky. Here's what she wrote, starting off with a quote from Arundhati Roy:

"Another world is not only possible, she's on the way, and, on a quiet day if you listen very carefully, you can hear her breathe."¹

And then Jamie continues:

"There's something compelling about being reminded that a *new story* is trying to be born into being — and to be born into the world *through* us.

"**Have you been feeling** . . . the uncertainty, the pressure, the pull of something trying to be born through you, to be midwifed into being *by* you and your fellow midwives?

"It may be something you've been feeling, following, and stepping (or stumbling, or getting dragged kicking and screaming) into for quite a while now.

"**A sense of purpose** that sometimes you can see and feel clearly and sometimes not, as if you're moving forward step-by-step across a bridge between *old* — what's passing, and *new* — what's being born.

On the cusp between two worlds, two ways of being, with a bridge in between.

Image of a Bridge; A Woman Paused

So then, in the middle of this blog text, we have an image of a bridge in the woods and a woman paused near the center of the bridge, as though uncertain about continuing on the path in her elegant dress. What I like about the picture is that you can tell the woman has stopped purposefully.

She had been walking but she has emerged from a dark and mysterious wood into a place that holds little promise of escape from the foreboding scene. She is immobile, unsure of her surroundings and lacking in confidence.

¹ From a speech entitled "Confronting Empire," given at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, 1/28/03.



A BRIDGE IN THE WOODS: Emerging from a dark wood into an uncertain environment.

If you look at the bridge, you too might stop. It's rickety. It's unsure and unsuitable for her long white dress.

The Symbolism of the Painting . . .

. . . Crossing a bridge into something new, is very evocative. You can sort of get a feel for why she paused. Is this where she wants to go or not? Has she the courage or the inquisitiveness to continue on the new path? Or has she the fear or the despondence to turn about and return to the old path?

The sentiments that Jamie wrote about resonate with me. I feel that way about the Christian faith generally, and, to be honest, it gets heightened, it gets exacerbated by Christmas.

I have an old understanding of Christmas, the one I was taught as a child, the one into which

I was born, with which I am no longer satisfied. Too much theology and too much science have forced me to change, to cross a new bridge.

A New Understanding for Me Is Born

It is a bridge that I have been crossing for some time now, and the notion of stepping or stumbling or being dragged kicking and screaming into the new path has been completely true. The old path, in which I no longer believe, was at the core of an old understanding of my faith.

“Jesus, the Light of the World,” by William Holman Hunt, is a famous painting that gets to the core of what used to be an almost universal conception of Christianity and that remains so even today for millions of people who still trod the ancient path.



"JESUS, THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD"

Jesus is knocking at an old door, and the symbolism of the painting shows that the door, which represents the door to your heart, hasn't been opened in a very long time. Indeed, a tiny detail in the painting reveals no knob on the door. It can be opened only from the inside.

Now this painting has been bastardized on the internet like you wouldn't believe. It's a beautiful painting, but a thousand different caricatures of it have been made. One of them I find very funny: Text is positioned vertically on the on the right side of the image, going all the way down, and it basically goes like this:

What Jesus Is Going to Do to You?

"Knock, knock."

"Who's there?"

"Jesus." [It doesn't go on to say, "Jesus who?" It's not a 'knock, knock' joke.]

"What do you want?"

"I've come to save you."

"From what?"

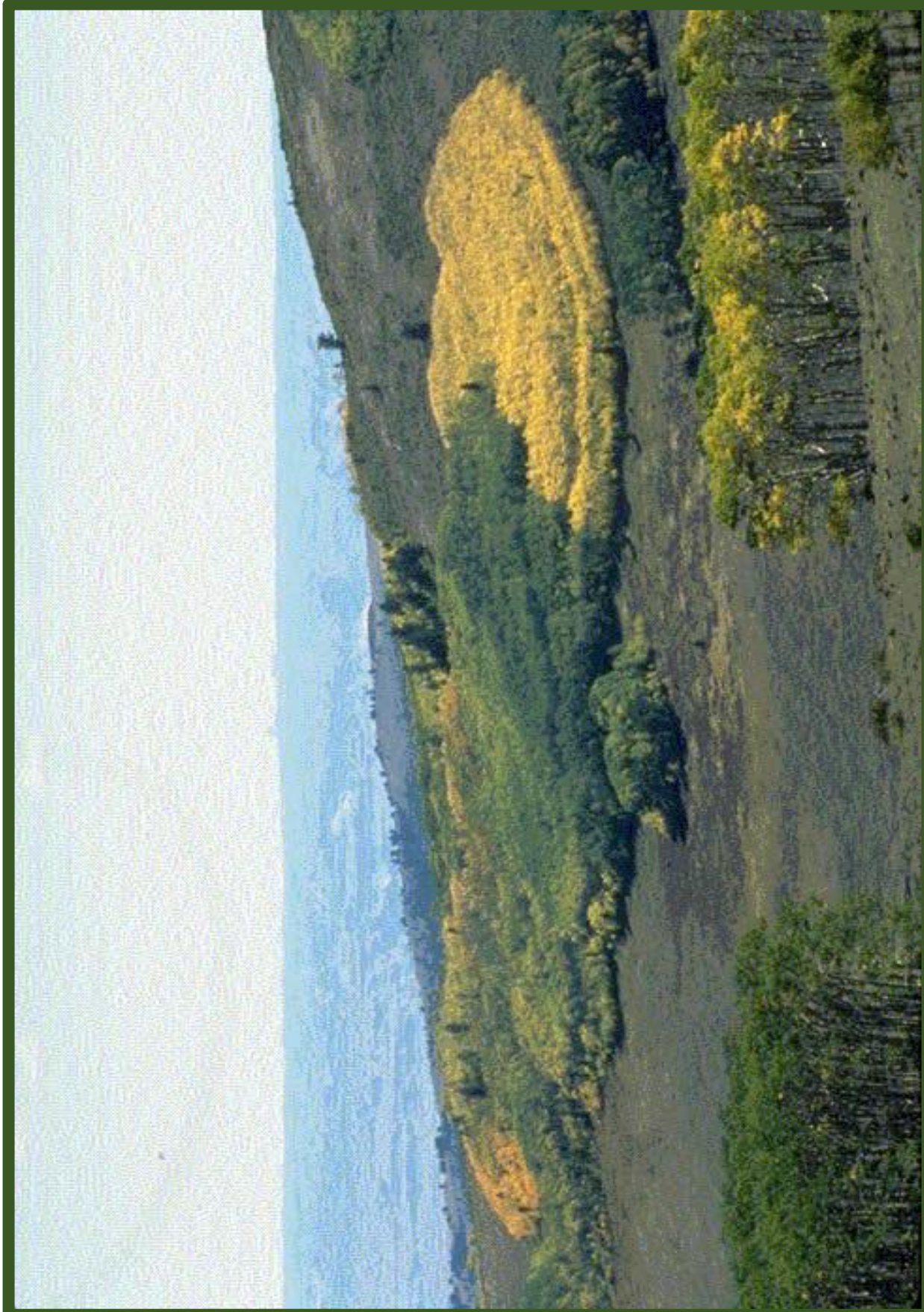
"From what I'm going to do to you if you don't open the door."

This joke hints at a rather deeply disturbing quality, though, in that God is both the punisher and the forgiver. Both the one who threatens and the one who comforts. At a subliminal level, it is reminiscent of one of those psychologically sick parents who abuse

[Text continues on page 7.]



A SMALL GROVE OF POPULUS TREMULOIDES



THE PANDO GROVE: Largest single organism on earth, 80,000 yrs., 107 acres.



and punish a child and then fully expect that child to find comfort and solace in the same arms that were raised against it, creating schizophrenia in the mind of the child.

This understanding of the old approach to Christianity is everywhere. I could quote you absurdly antiquated lines from some of the carols. “What Child Is This,” “Why Lies the Child in Manger Bare,” “Give Heed, Draw Near.”

Or in “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,” we have the line, “Mild he lays his glory by, born that we no more may die.” Furthermore, in “The First Nowell,” there is a verse that claims the star “did both stop and stay right over the place where Jesus lay.” And then there’s the carole “We Three Kings of Orient Are,” who followed a star bearing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. That of course never happened.

What Is the Meaning of Christmas?

When I was a young adult studying theology seriously for the first time, I asked my pastor, “What is the meaning of Christmas?” Theologically, deep, deep underneath, why was that Christmas and Easter? Easter I sort of got. But what’s the purpose of the incarnation? And I remember the answer as if it were yesterday, even though it was well over thirty years ago.

Here’s the way Christmas was explained to me as a young man, which I had embraced for most of my adult life. So my pastor proposed an analogy to an anthill. Suppose you are standing in a field, and you are looking at an anthill there on the ground. The ants are coming and going, doing their thing. Lots of activity. Things are great until you look up and off in the distance you can see that a farmer has begun to plow this field.

Are the Tractor and Plow a Warning?

You look at the tractor and the plow, and you look down at the anthill and realize it is doomed. It’s just a matter of time before the plow comes along, turns the earth over, kills the ants, and destroys their home.

And so the person gazing upon the anthill ponders this situation for a while. How can he warn the ants? An idea occurs: If only he could become an ant and be born into that anthill, he could then warn them about the impending doom. Therefore, ipso facto Christmas came to be.

If you follow that line of thought down the road, the conclusion is that the ultimate purpose of Christmas is a warning and, if successful, a prevention of impending doom.

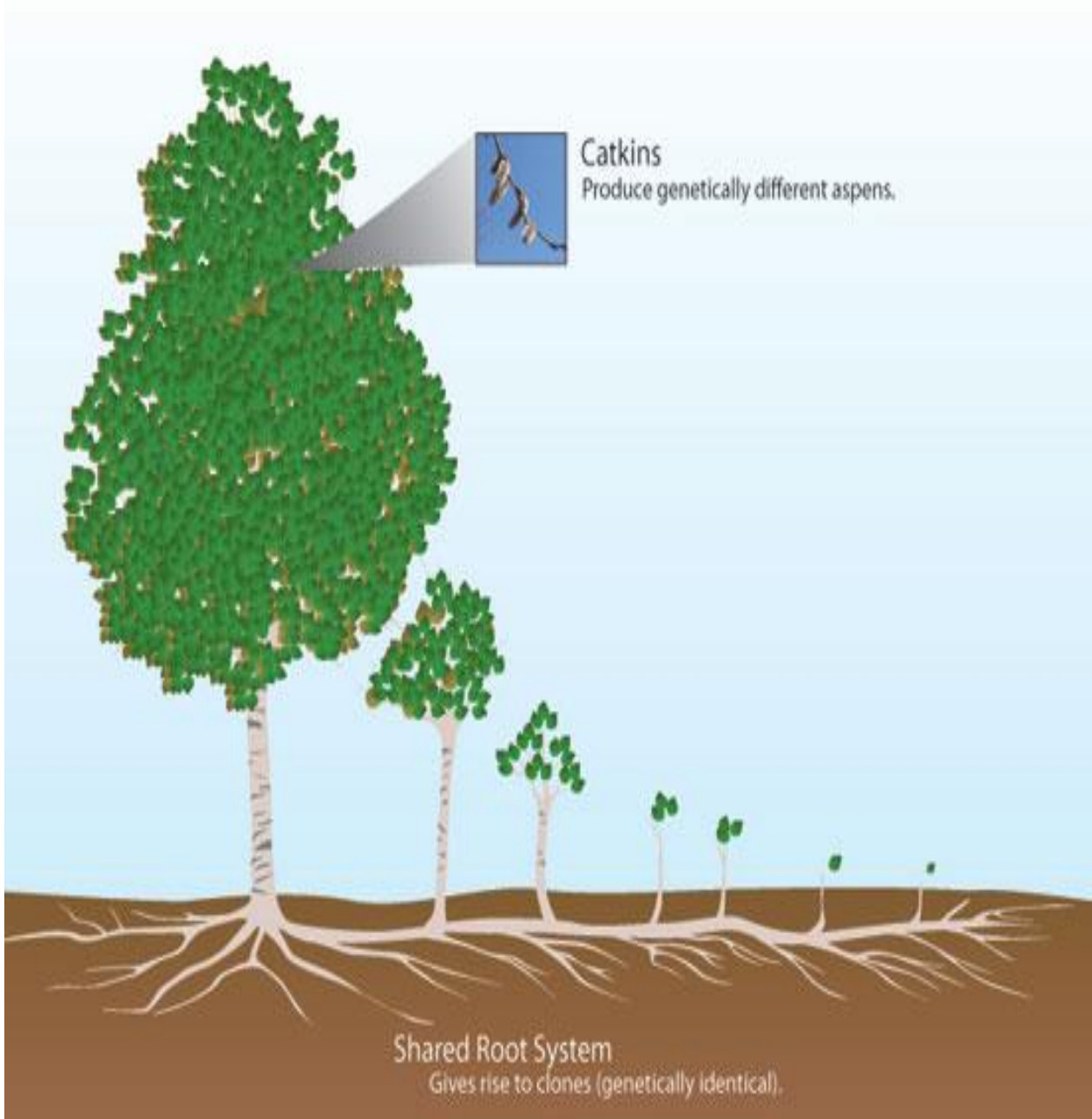
Now you see why I’m trying to cross a bridge. But what if that isn’t true? Let me plant a seed of doubt in your mind. What if there is a new story being born that we are all taking faltering steps upon a rickety bridge to try to cross into a new path to understanding our faith.

What if that ant analogy is flawed? Fatally flawed? Worthless? What if we aren’t ants at all but are children, children of God? What if there is no plow? What if any destruction we experience is of our own making? What if we are huddled in fear for no reason?

Let Me Offer a Different Story or Analogy

You might feel that the ant story is sort of silly. But let me remind you: An analogy is not inherently real. It’s real only in that it points toward an understanding.

I’d like to offer another equally silly story that points to a different understanding.



The picture on page 4 shows a small grove of aspen trees. They range from northern Mexico all the way up into Alaska in the West. Their name, by the way, is *Populus tremuloides*. *Populus* is of the poplar family, and they're called quaking aspens, so you get *tremuloides* for the species name.

They cover vast areas like the photo on page 5. Beautiful in the wind, the quaking has to do with the stem of the aspen leaf, called the petiole. What happens on the aspen is that the petiole isn't a little round thing like a normal stem, but instead it is flat at 90 degrees to the leaf. So whenever any kind of breeze comes along, it makes the leaf quake or tremble. Thus, *tremuloides*, and so the breeze makes the leaf act in a strange way that eastern maple and oak leaves don't do.

47,000 Trees Are One Single Organism

Now this picture is the important one. In this particular grove of aspens, you can see the oblong shape. It's in southern Utah and is called the Pando grove. It consists of 47,000 individual trees, but in actuality the entire Pando is only one giant living thing. All the trees are interconnected, linked invisibly underground to one another.

Totaling 47,000 trees, 106 acres, this is the largest single organism on earth. You're looking at a picture of it taken from an airplane. Bigger than a sequoia, bigger than a blue whale, the largest single organism on earth is estimated to be upwards of 80,000 years old. It has seen several ice ages come and go.

There's another, smaller grouping, not with its own name; this is the way they grow. You

can see the root system that comes along, and out of the root system up comes another tree, and up comes another tree, and the root grows and up comes still another tree to produce upwards of 47,000 of them.

This Tree Is Aware of Its Root System

A different analogy. A different story than the ants. At Christmas — work with me on this — at Christmas a new little sprout emerged out of the ground. It grew normally until it became a fine and even beautiful young tree, an adult tree.

The difference was that this particular tree had a heightened awareness of the root system — that invisible connection between between each other and the earth. That tree thought that connection was so cool, so beautiful, so sacred and holy that it talked of little else to the other trees, even though in their misunderstanding some of the other trees found it threatening.

So the Purpose of Christmas Is?

Is it a warning to prevent impending doom? Or, let me offer a different alternative, to teach us of our connection, our shared life, our one nature that's rather invisible underneath it all.

To guide us on our path to life and love and peace. A path, by the way, which leads to a bridge that's frightening to cross but rather worth it.

Frightening perhaps, but the path does not end at the bridge. It is not the end of life, but, like the interconnectedness of the endless root system of the quaking aspen, it is the path of life, not the fear of death.

Amen.

