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Our Saviour/St. Stephen  
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Advent 1

Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, there is a verse in our gospel message today that disturbs me. Maybe it disturbs you, too.

The verse is Mark 13:31.

There is says, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."

This is Jesus here speaking: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."

And when I read this verse, I wonder what is our Lord saying here?

Is this to say that all that we know—this world, and the universe... Is this to say that all that we know will one day be no more?

And if so, then what's the point? Why even create human beings in the first place?

After all, where will we be, if there is no earth nor heaven for us to exist?

And what does phrase "but my words will not pass away" mean?

Hardly seems comforting to say "my words will not pass away" when there is no heaven nor earth.

PAUSE

But if we do a little research, we find that the bible speaks of a new heaven and a new earth that will emerge.

Isaiah 65:17-19; 2 Peter 3:13; and Revelation 21:1 all speak of a new heaven and a new earth that will emerge.

So it is not that heaven and earth will pass away, and there will be nothing but Jesus' words.

No, the old heaven and the old earth will be replaced by a new heaven and a new earth.

And the reference to Jesus' words not passing away likely refers to Jesus' prediction about the end time and the events surrounding the transition from the former heaven and earth to the new heaven and earth.

In short, the Bible is pretty specific about there being both a world in which we live now and a world that is to come.

And it almost seems as though the world that is to come is right there just about to break in, that the world that is to come is only hidden behind a thin veil that simply needs to be pulled back.

So, there is this world and there is the new world.

And, personally, I find this notion—of this world and another world—to be something almost inherent in human thought.

PAUSE

To be sure, our culture seems to love this idea that just beyond this world there is another world out there.

For this idea appears over and over again in the books, movies, and stories we love.

Think about the story of *Alice in Wonderland* where a young girl named Alice falls through a rabbit hole into a fantasy world filled with anthropomorphic creatures.

Think about *The Wizard of Oz*, where another girl named Dorothy is transported by way of a tornado from this world to a world filled with Munchkins and witches, where her traveling companions are a lion, a scarecrow, and a tin man.

Think of C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, where an entirely different world exists just beyond, through the doors of a wardrobe.

In more contemporary times, we can think of that Pixar movie *Monsters, Inc.*, where monsters live and move and have their being in their world, but come into our world, into children's bedrooms to scare them in order to collect their scream to power the monster world.

Or think about the movie *The Matrix*, where machines in the real world have developed artificial intelligence and have imprisoned the human species, creating a dreamworld for human minds, a sort of computerized neuro-network, so as to keep humans in control, while extracting their energy needs from the human body.

Or think about the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, where there is the prison world populated by inmates, but just on the other side of the prison wall, there is another world altogether.

Yes, our culture, our human species, seems to love this idea that just beyond the world that we know, there is an altogether different world.

Movies, books, television—the very premise of entertainment media is to take us out of our present world for awhile.

Yes, entertainment for the most part serves as an escape for a time from what we know.

And if we have been to an AMC Movie Theater recently, then we no doubt have seen actress Nicole Kidman appear on the big screen before our movie began speaking these words...

“We come to this place for magic. We come to AMC Theaters to laugh, to cry, to care. Because we need that, all of us. That indescribable feeling we get when the lights begin to dim and we go somewhere we’ve never been before. Not just entertained, but somehow reborn, together. Dazzling images on a huge silver screen. Sound that I can feel. Somehow heartbreak feels good in a place like this. Our heroes, feel like the best part of us. And stories feel perfect and power. Because here, they are.”

That is AMC’s take on the movie experience—that feeling of being transported to another world.

PAUSE

And it is not just our modern culture, but our ancestors knew that feeling of a movie, described by Nicole Kidman, well before we ever did.

The ancient philosopher Plato described the power of a movie, described the power of that feeling of being in one world while another world lay just on the other side.

In Plato's work entitled *Republic*, Plato describes the allegory of "The Cave," but does so by means of dialogue in the *Republic* between Plato's brother Glaucon and Plato's mentor Socrates.

In the allegory of "The Cave", there is a group of people who have lived chained to the wall of a cave all their lives.

These chained individuals, these prisoners in the cave, face a blank wall in the cave, and they watch shadows projected on the wall from objects passing in front of a fire that is situated behind them.

And it is almost like some strange puppet show—a horse shadow moves across the wall, and maybe some human shadows appear, so on and so forth.

And the shadows are the prisoners' reality, but of course the shadows are not accurate representations of the real world.

The shadows represent only a fragment of reality that we can normally perceive through our senses.

And the ancient philosopher is described as a prisoner who is now freed from the cave and who comes to understand the shadows for what they are.

A philosopher then was understood as one who strives in this world to understand and perceive the higher levels of reality.

However, those in this world who lack the insight of a philosopher are like those inmates of the cave who do not even desire to leave their prison, for they know no better life.

Here then is an early description of what movies really are—mere shadows on a wall projected from behind us.

PAUSE

And I bring all this up because this is how the early Church understood their reality.

That just on the other side of this world, there was a new heaven and a new earth.

Perhaps the early Christian thinkers were influenced by Plato's *Republic* and the allegory of "The Cave."

Who knows?

But early Christians truly did see themselves as enlightened, like the ancient philosophers.

Early Christians understood themselves as seeing what this world is—that is, a shadow of what awaits when the new heaven and the new earth breaks in.

Today, we still have hints of that sense of imprisonment without enlightenment.

Wording in the Confession and Forgiveness says things like...

We confess that we are CAPTIVE to sin and cannot free ourselves.

We are in bondage, captive, imprisoned to sin...

And so, yes, there is something to this notion of a world just beyond our world.

I say that because it is something almost hardwired into the human psyche.

Why else would we find it in so many of our stories—the movies we see, the books we read, the television we watch.

Maybe we are drawn so much of this sense of another world in our present life, because the world we live in is so full of suffering and grief, such that we can't help but long and hope for a better world.

PAUSE

But here is where then we need to be careful, for you see it is one thing to long for that new and improved world.

But it is another thing to write off this world, to abandon any hope for this world, to dismiss this world as hopeless.

Too often humans in history have seen this world as theirs to dominate, because in the book of Genesis God says we humans are to have dominion over creation and subdue it.

And that has been how we have approached creation more often than not—such that we can exploit the earth of all its resources.

And in the end God will make all things new, so we can all but write off this present world.

## PAUSE

But when we think about our world, and where we are today, I come back to a photo taken by the Voyager I spacecraft on February 14 (Valentine's Day), 1990.

The spacecraft was at an unprecedented distance from the earth, 3.7 billion miles.

The Voyager 1 spacecraft was launched in 1977 with the initial purpose of studying the outer Solar System.

After fulfilling its primary mission and as it ventured out of the Solar System, the decision was made to turn its camera around and capture one last image of Earth.

Carl Sagan, who was part of the imaging team, had asked mission control to do this.

And the image captured is that of a very tiny dot suspended in a sunbeam, surrounded by the deep blackness of space.

You can Google "Pale Blue Dot" to see the image for yourselves.

Sagan wrote this about the image:

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.

The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner, how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds.

Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. 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.

PAUSE

My fear as a Christian believer is that we as a human species have become “complacent” while we await the new earth and the heaven, that we think the world has unlimited resources, and that we think somehow the future generations don’t matter, after all God is going to make a new heaven and a new earth.

And so I wonder if the veil to be pealed back is not so much some veil that hides the world just beyond, but the veil that covers our minds, so that we are not blind to the little blue dot which is the only home we have.

In our gospel reading Jesus our Lord says, Keep awake.

And I wonder if that warning should not be more a message to see the reality around us for what it is, and unfortunately what it is becoming, and not just some warning to watch for the Savior.

Keep awake.

Indeed, heaven and earth may be passing away. And the timeless and timely words of God may be the prophetic words of Carl Sagan, as much as the words of Jesus Christ.

Keep awake.

And so we pray...Lord, remove the veil over our minds, and help us to see this world for what it can be, and by your grace help us as a human species to make this world a new world.

Keep awake. Thanks be to God. AMEN.