

This past week there was an interesting interview in *Newsweek* magazine with the comedian and filmmaker Woody Allen. Despite his success and sense of humor, according to this article, “at age 72, Woody Allen says he still lies awake at night, terrified of the void.” It goes on to say that Allen knows why he makes movies—over 70 so far—not because he has any grand statement to offer, but simply to take his mind off the existential horror of being alive.

Movies are a great diversion, he says, ‘because it’s much more pleasant to be obsessed over how the hero gets out of his predicament than it is over how I get out of mine.’ The article emphasizes that Allen is a strident atheist and is serious about his agony of trying to avoid the void. “‘My mother always said I was a very cheerful kid until I was 5 years old, and then I turned gloomy.’ He can only attribute that shift to *an awareness of death.*”

Words like pessimistic, bleak, and morbid typically are used to characterize this outlook of Woody Allen’s. But for the Christian, and for the Jew steeped in the biblical tradition, the response to this grim vision of life, would be—or should be—tell me something I don’t know! After all, it is no less than the prophet Isaiah who proclaims: “Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath; because the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and those who live on it will die like gnats!”

Hey, you want to talk about pessimistic, bleak and morbid? Just read your Bible!

And for that matter read your Book of Common Prayer: “Remember that dust thou art, and to dust thou shall return.” We might say Woody Allen is having an “Ash Wednesday moment”... every day of his life—except, of course, when he’s busy making a film and avoiding the void.

Allen says that “making films offers no reward beyond distracting him from his plight. He claims the payoff is in the process—‘I need to be focused on something so I don’t see *the big picture*.’” The problem with this is that it is precisely this “big picture” we need to see. Yes, all things come to an end; and yes, life to a great degree is suffering. Read your Bible, pray your Prayer Book, and look at the cross.

But there’s more to the story than this. If we can bear to see the big picture, in which death front and center; if we can bear this—with faith—then we will see that this big picture is actually framed within and even bigger picture. As the prophet Isaiah proclaims, “The heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and those who live on it will die like gnats; *but my salvation will be forever, and my deliverance will never be ended.*”

“My salvation will be forever, and my deliverance will never be ended.” That’s the *really* big picture. The challenge for us is to become part of the really big picture.

It’s true that so many people devote their entire lives to trying to avoid the void. Woody Allen is remarkable because he’s honest about what he doing. For most it remains unconscious. Nonetheless, “all we go down to the dust;” and yet even at the grave those who are part of the really big picture make their song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

So where do all these alleluias come from if in the end it's the end? If in the end it's simply curtains?

In his Letter to the Romans, Paul takes time to remind these early Christians about their "gifts." He points out that, "We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us." And then he goes on to list some of the gifts, or we might say "vocations," provided, in this case, for the upbuilding of the Church. There's prophecy, teaching, exhorting, leadership, compassion, and so on.

Here Paul seems to be trying to get his fellow Christians to focus on what's been graciously gifted to them by God. At the same time he wants to get them away from pridefully and egotistically thinking about themselves. He tells them, "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned." In other words, think of yourselves, your lives and your relationships with others and the larger community, and even society, in terms of the big picture, the really big picture.

I would say that God's eternal, everlasting salvation and deliverance is realized on a daily basis by living according to the gifts given us by God.

This is something to keep in mind on this Welcome Home Sunday as we celebrate the ministries of St. John's Church. Our ministries, guilds and circles not only represent faithful service to others, but also God's gifts. We have gifts, as did the early Christians in Rome, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. These gifts for us are God's everlasting salvation and deliverance.

This is because God's gifts to us, individually and corporately, are expressions of nothing less than God's love. And this love is what carries us through the big picture to the really big picture. The void is there, but love puts it in its proper place by reframing it in an ever bigger picture. God's love is what enables us to live fearlessly, relieved of the burden of "existential horror" in whatever particular form that may take.

I love Woody Allen's sense of humor and his films. I also respect his honesty. If only he could see his creative work not as avoiding the void, but instead as nothing less than a gift from God. Then, perhaps, the resulting gratitude and humility might show him the way to get out of his predicament.

In the meantime, let us continue each and every day to give thanks to God in the knowledge that *we have gifts*. AMEN.