

In the Beginning Was the Word

I. Christmas is about hope

A. One of the hymns we sing at Christmas that resonates deeply with us is entitled, "*In the Bleak Mid-winter.*" [Hymnal, p. 112]

1. On the surface, for those of us living in the northern hemisphere it could be about the weather.
 - a. Christmas comes at the darkest time of the year, just after the winter solstice, the shortest day when the Sun's life giving light has been fading away steadily for the past six months.
2. But the bleakness is not really from the snow and cold but the winter chill among us:
 - a. the chill of anxiety,
 - b. the freeze of fear,
 - c. the iciness of hate,
 - d. the frigidness of exclusion and violence
3. Our discontent causes us to retreat into our comfort zones of tribe and mantra that exclude all those we define as 'others.'
4. In the bleakness of midwinter God became incarnate,
 - a. warming away winter anxiety,
 - b. thawing us away from winter fear,
 - c. melting us away from winter hate, and
 - d. breaking the frozen winter violence among us,
so that our winter of discontent may end. [Walter Brueggemann, Celebrating Abundance: Devotions for Advent, Westminster, 2017, p. 87]

B. What that hymn evokes in us is that Christmas is about hope. At Christmas God speaks clearly and acts decisively.

1. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, it is time to forget the 'former things' (43:18).
 - a. It is now time for letting go, giving up, releasing what is past.
2. At Christmas, we hear, "*God is doing a new thing.*"
 - a. What is past is being powerfully displaced by what is new, and healing and liberating. ----
 - b. The prophet adds, "*Do you not perceive it?*"

II. Where does hope come from?

- A. All the scriptures appointed for this 1st Sunday of Christmas are major statements of hope.
1. If we could trace their influence I believe we could say that they have changed the world.
 2. Matthew Fox quoted the eco-philosopher, David Orr who described hope as *“a verb with the sleeves rolled up.”*
 - a. In his sermon here Dec. 3 he said, *“Hope is not about optimism,\ not about paying attention to the facts as dire and apocalyptic as they may be. Hope is about going to work,\ rolling up our sleeves and working,\ not out of an ‘action/reaction’ reptilian brain response,\ but working out of a deeper place inside of us. The place where possibility emerges,\ the place where creativity catches fire.”*
- B. 3rd Isaiah who wrote after Israel’s Babylonian exile faces his people’s return to their homeland where they faced poverty, destruction and corruption.
1. Their home had become an unwelcome place. Their suffering was not over.
 2. In the midst of this profound discouragement, the prophet writes, *“For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem’s sake, I will not rest....You shall become a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.”* (62:1, 3)
 - a. The prophet called his people to action out of deep hope.
- C. Paul’s letter to the Galatians has been called a *“Manifesto of Freedom,”* written before any of the gospels.
1. Speaking from his own Pharisaic background, Paul says God has done something miraculous, calling us to transformation, to a spiritual second birth.
 2. He is speaking out of that deeper place within himself where he has experienced a profound transformation.
 3. But he is passionate that this is not just about himself,-- this is a universal message of hope for all the world.
 - a. He has discovered the realm of fullness, what we hear in the prologue to the Gospel of John where the writer says, *“From his (Christ’s) fullness we have all received grace upon grace.”* (Jn. 1:16)

b. Paul became known as the ‘*Apostle of Grace.*’

D. In one sentence, the Prologue of John sums up what Paul taught and preached, “*The law indeed was given through Moses, \ grace and truth came through Jesus Christ,*” (Jn. 1:17) – something wondrously new.

1. This writer, called the “*mystic,*” thought to be writing a few generations later uses the term ‘*grace*’ four times in the Prologue and not again in the entire gospel.
2. In these verses he identifies grace as the “*Word become flesh.*”
 - a. The humanity of Jesus was fullness itself, \ the fullness of the creative Word (Logos) present in all creation, \ at the heart of the existence of all things.
 - b. At the heart of our existence is Grace, \ the Word made flesh. So the humanity of Jesus speaks to our human condition.
3. Grace is “*God with us,*” (*Immanuel*) in our humanity, \ in our flesh, \ in our weakness.
 - a. Jesus exhibits God’s glory, “*full of grace and truth;*” Jesus mediates through Grace, God’s benefits for God’s people.
 - b. “*To those who received him, he gave them authority to become children of God.*”
4. The writer of this Prologue addresses a question that we may have. It is the subtle question of how can there be a possibility of hope in the face of the darkness that seems to overwhelm.
 - a. The Prologue says it is because the divine Word, manifested in the appearance of Jesus, is embedded in creation.
 - (1. The world is not something alien to Jesus, to which he comes as an outsider or invader.
 - b. John says, the story of Jesus and the story of the cosmos is the same story. Always this new life was present.
 - c. This also helps to understand Jesus’ teaching in the *Beatitudes* when he says, “*The meek shall inherit the earth.*”
 - (1. It’s the way things are.

III. Who will bring about this New Life, this new birth if not us?

- A. Biblical scholars tell us that Jesus' birth was not in the winter.
1. It was in the 4th century that the Church in Rome chose Dec. 25 as the date for the Christmas celebration.
 - a. That in itself should be a clue for us that the coming of Christ was meant to be tied to whole cosmos, the coming of the light into the darkness.
 - b. The birth is celebrated in '*awe and wonder*' by choirs of angels,\ stars,\ animals,\ shepherds and wise men,\ Joseph and Mary.
 - (1. It is both cosmic and personal.
 - (2. Christ's manger was at the Inn in Bethlehem and in the abundant, generous universe.
 2. Christ's birth then is also a celebration of yours and my birth into this holy,\ unrepeatable,\ and wondrous cosmos.
 - a. The mystics tell us that we are all "*other Christs.*"
 - b. Meister Eckhart said, we are all meant to be "*mothers of God,*" to birth the 'Prince of Peace' in ourselves and in our cultures,
 - (1. to be "*a great Light*" in the darkness of poverty and antagonism, of greed, and war and racism.
 - c. Thomas Merton said, "*We exist solely for this – to be the place God has chosen for God's presence in the world. If we recognize, humbly but truly, the real value of our own self, we would see this as the sign of God in our being, the signature of God upon our own being.*"
 3. Matthew Fox writes, "The universe of 13.8 billion years and trillions of galaxies pours itself in human form over and over again.
 - a. Why would it do so?
 - b. There must be a great attraction involved here, a great love.
 - c. A sensitive awareness of a deep need on the part of humans to get their act together finally, to be agents of grace and compassion, of creative healing and wondrous beauty.
 - d. God among us. God with us, Emmanuel indeed."

[Matthew Fox and Marc Andrus, Stations of the Cosmic Christ, pp. 23-34, 74-76]