

ADVENT 1: THE INCARNATION OF HOPE

(12/01/19)

Scripture Lessons: Romans 5:1-5, 15:13
Luke 1:26-38

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Romans 15:13)

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent is a time of preparation. In our Advent worship we prepare ourselves for not only the celebration but also the experience of Christmas. Advent gives us the time we need to look at the many parts of Christmas that we might experience how they touch us and come to understand how they apply to us as individuals.

Christmas is like a dream, but it is a dream that actually happened, that incarnated in the world of space and time. When I am trying to understand a dream, if I think of the characters in the dream as people in the outer world, it is often confusing. It doesn't seem to fit. However, if I think of each of the characters as a part of me, I have a tool to help unlock the meaning and message of the dream.

Scripture itself is like a dream, a mystical message from another realm, the realm of eternity. It is a message from God to us. We commonly believe that scripture tells us something about ancient history, about people in the outer world, people who lived a long time ago. But what if all the characters of scripture are really parts of us?

This would mean that we are like Peter; we sometimes deny our Lord. We are like Judas; we sometimes betray our deepest values. We are like the blind man, the leper, and the woman in need of healing. When we read the Bible this way, it is no longer ancient history or only ancient history; it confronts us with parts of ourselves and challenges us to grow both psychologically and spiritually.

Think of the many people who are part of the Christmas story: Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and the magi—each of them is a part of us. King Herod, who was so afraid that the emergence of this new spiritual force would turn his world upside down that he tried to suppress it—he is also a part of us. The innkeeper who had no room for the holy family in his inn—we are ashamed to say that even he is a part of us. The angel who tells Mary that she is about to conceive and give birth to the Son of God—this angel is also a part of us. Even the Christmas star is there within us to show us the way to the manger.

This Advent season, as we prepare for the celebration and the experience of Christmas, I would like us to take a closer look at someone who was not only a part of the Christmas story two thousand years ago but who is also a part of us, part of our Christmas story and our spiritual pilgrimage. In our worship this Advent, I would like us to think about Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the precious gift of incarnation.

I never thought much about Mary when I was a child. You see, I grew up as a Protestant. Our Sunday school didn't spend much time teaching us about Mary. We certainly weren't taught to pray to Mary. Catholics did that, and we definitely didn't want to be like Catholics.

As presented in the gospels, Mary is not an important part of the story. She was not an important figure in Jesus' adult life. As we Protestants pointed out in relation to the Catholic devotion to Mary, whom they call "the mother of God," Mary was not the mother of God. The Creator of the universe was around long before Mary. This God not only did not have a mother, this God could be seen as the Great Mother who gave birth and continues to give birth to all creation. Mary was not the mother of God; she was simply the mother of Jesus.

This is technically correct. Mary does not have a central place in the gospels. The apostle Paul regarded her as of little importance. In fact, the only reference I can find to Mary in Paul's letters is Galatians 4:4, which reads:

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.

Note that Paul doesn't even mention Mary by name. If we remember how important Paul's teachings were to the early church, for Paul's letters were the first written documents of our faith, we can see how relatively unimportant Mary was to the first century Christians.

So, from an historical perspective I was probably correct in my belief that Catholics have blown the importance of Mary way out of proportion. However, I was wrong, short sighted, and spiritually immature in this judgment because I failed to understand that the people of scripture are also a part of us. Mary may not have been important historically, but she is important spiritually. She is a part of me, a part of all of us, a part of life. This is because what doesn't make sense literally and historically does make sense in the spiritual realm, the realm of eternity.

In our worship during this Advent season, I invite us to make this distinction. I invite us to listen to the Christmas story not only as literal history, distant and past, but also as symbolic

and spiritual, as present here and now. I invite us to find Mary within ourselves. If we can do this, we may experience what she gives birth to, what she incarnates within us.

I had an interesting reminder of this truth last Saturday. After we dropped our pies and pumpkin breads off at the pie sale, Darlene and I drove up to Chelmsford to attend an Armenian church food festival. While we were there, one of the deacons gave a power-point presentation on the history of their church, and he and the priest showed us around the sanctuary. The art, all of which was deeply symbolic, was amazing. At one point, the priest, to whom I took an immediate liking, casually mentioned that the chalice that holds the wine that, through the miracle of transubstantiation, is transformed into the blood of Christ, is like Mary. The chalice is symbolic of Mary because in it or through it, Christ enters into our everyday life. I have never thought about the cup, the chalice this way. This is exactly what I am trying to say this morning, the first Sunday of Advent, which for us is a communion Sunday.

There are two quotes from the 12th century German mystic Angelus Silesius that will frame the central theme of our reflections throughout this Advent season. The first is,

If you hope to give birth to God on earth, remember--conception takes place in the heart, the womb of the Eternal.

The second is,

Though Christ a thousand times in Bethlehem be born, if he's not born in thee, thy soul is still forlorn.

Angelus Silesius suggests that if we can find Mary within ourselves, we can discover what it means to give birth to God on earth. Like Mary, we can give birth to the Christ. We can't do this literally, as Mary did in giving birth to Jesus, but we can do this spiritually. When we provide a place for God to enter, a place for the Word of God to become incarnate in us, we will experience the wonder and the miracle of Mary. We can do this because, according to scripture, Jesus' conception was not literal and sexual, it was spiritual.

This morning, the first Sunday of Advent, we open ourselves to receive the first of the gifts that can become incarnate *in us* and then become incarnate *through us*--the gift of hope. This Advent season calls us to develop the spiritual discipline of being a hopeful or hope-filled person. If we can do this, then we, like Mary, can give birth to hope in our world.

I think we can speak of giving birth to this spiritual gift simply because everything that is a part of God enters into this world through us. There is no other way that it can get here, that it can enter into our personal and collective consciousness. Like Mary, we incarnate the gifts of God; we give birth to them; we bring them into the realm of space and time. If we are hopeful people, then hope finds expression in the world. Whenever and wherever this happens, some life, some interaction is qualitatively the better for its presence. The same is true of peace, joy, and love.

The birth of Jesus brought a word of hope to the people of his time. It can do the same for us. We need to remember that although we speak of hope as a human trait, hope does not come from us. Hope comes from God, from the realm of the eternal. We also need to remember that although we casually speak of hope as synonymous with wishing, as in I hope I get a new BMW 7 series this Christmas, hope is much more than wishing. Hope is an experiential vision of God's will for us and for the world.

Hope is one of the most powerful of all human emotions. There is no human experience or state of mind as crushing as the feeling of despair. This is why so many of our hymns are hymns of hope. Listen to the words of our closing hymn:

*O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.*

In the dark streets of our lives, in the dark streets of our nation, in the dark streets of our world, hope appears like an everlasting light. It keeps us going when we are tempted to quit. It lights our path. It gives us courage to rise above difficult and painful situations, to throw off the darkness of depression and despair. It strengthens the powers of healing within us.

The apostle Paul tells us that because hope arises from faith, it helps us to connect in a very deep way with God. Hope brings the assurance that what God began in Jesus will be brought to fruition in us and then in the world through us.

In this Advent season, let us remember the words of Angelus Silesius:

Though Christ a thousand times in Bethlehem be born, if he's not born in thee thy soul is still forlorn.

This teaching about birth, about incarnation, is also true of hope. If Jesus, the hope of the nations, is not born again and again within us, we will live our lives without hope. Without hope, our soul will be forlorn. And we will not be able to bring a message of hope to those who desperately need it, to a nation that desperately needs it.

In the quiet moments of this Advent season, let us, like Mary, open our hearts to God. Let us open our hearts to God to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. If we open our hearts in faith, we, like Mary, might become “the womb of the Eternal,” receiving the blessed gift of hope in our lives, the hope that we need to carry us as individuals through dark and difficult times.

Then, like Mary, we can give birth to this great gift in our daily lives; we can incarnate it as a gift of grace to our nation and to a world that desperately needs it.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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