

THE ANSWER TO FEAR IS HOPE!

(12/03/2023)

Scripture Lessons: 2 Timothy 1:1-7
Romans 5:1-5,15:13
Luke 2:21-35

“For God gave us a spirit not of fear, but of power and love and self-control.” (2 Timothy 1:7)

“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)

Every year as the darker, shorter, and colder days of November and December descend upon us, we enter the Advent season. Advent is a time set aside for us to prepare for the celebration of Christmas. With all that is going on in our country and around the world, I have the feeling that we—and also the world-- *really* need the Spirit of Christmas this year!

Of course, as our Advent candle lighters remind us, we are talking about the inner *spiritual experience* of Christmas, not simply the celebration of an historical event. We are talking about having Christmas become a reality in our lives. As the 12th century German mystic Angelus Silesius has said,

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

C. G. Jung once said that the world's religions are the great collective therapeutic systems of humankind. Long before the birth of psychology, the religions of the world addressed the fundamental recurrent problems of human existence, and they still do. They address the meaning of life and the meaning of our individual lives. They address the awareness of death, the awareness of finitude, the experience of death, and they give us resources to prepare for our death. They connect us in various ways with the transcendent dimension of life and of our psyche. They address the existential anxiety that arises within us when we are living our life off center. They address the existential depression that arises in response to, that accompanies a collective and meaningless life. They provide us with a moral code to guide the living of our life and the conduct of our relationships. They provide us with living myths that shape the patterns, the stages of our life. They give us tools to become conscious of and repair the damage that we do to ourselves others, and life through our individual and collective sin, the ways we miss the mark by living our life off center. They tell us about love, how important it is, and how we should love both God and our neighbor. And they help us understand and work constructively with the roots of the fear that leads to hate, the hate that brings so much suffering to our brothers and sisters, the hate that poisons our very soul.

This is why we need religion; it is why, within our own religious tradition, we feel we really need Christmas this year! It is why we find ourselves drawn to the manger. We probably don't need much in the way of gifts. We probably don't need the excess of food and beverage that is endemic to this season. We need to experience both an individual and a collective psychotherapy, a healing of psyche or soul! We need this to counter the ubiquitous fear that is spreading over our country and over our world like a thick fog, a fog that keeps us from seeing one another clearly; a fog that keeps us from seeing one another through the eyes of God; a fog that threatens to blot out the light that God has sent to guide us--the light of the Christmas star.

I don't want to cite examples of the emergence and prevalence of this fear and the hate to which it gives rise. I don't want to do this because, at times, even I find the daily news to be depressing. I say "even I" because I am an incurable optimist! I tend to see the bigger picture. I take the long view that this is something that we probably need to go through if we are to move forward into a new and better world, a new and better life for *all* humanity.

When I am confronted with words and actions that are hateful, that are contrary to what I think we stand for here in America, like the targeted shooting of three young Palestinian-American college students in Burlington, Vermont last week, it challenges the way we think of ourselves; it challenges our belief that America and America alone is the great melting pot, rich from its diversity. When things like the shooting in Burlington and Lewiston happen, it strikes me as similar to what happens when you rip a scab off a wound in order for the wound to heal properly, in order for healing to take place *from the inside out*. By the way, this is what nurses in burn centers like Shriners hospitals do for children suffering from massive burns. I know this is what *really needs* to be done for a burn victim to heal properly, but I don't know if I could do it. I have tremendous respect for these nurses!

I also believe that when we rip off the scabs of prejudice, of sexism, of racism, of antisemitism, of Islamophobia, of discrimination against our LGBTQ brothers and sisters, our LGBTQ children, underneath the hatred and the desire to control, to dominate, to annihilate, is the emotion of fear. Fear is also at the root of the many forms of tribalism that are rending the beautiful fabric of human community asunder.

Perhaps what is happening in our country and around the world is something that needs to happen. Perhaps we were deluded into thinking that we had become conscious enough and mature enough to be able to build a relationship with people who are different from us. Perhaps we were deluded into thinking that we had overcome our innate tendency to feel superior, to look down on others, and to persecute members of certain racial, ethnic, religious, socio-economic groups, or persons who are of a certain gender or gender identity to bolster our low self-esteem or to advance our own economic or social standing. Perhaps we were deluded into thinking that most people in the world, if they were given a choice, would prefer to live in a democracy.

Recent votes in Argentina, in the Netherlands, Hungary, and recent polls in our country, should suffice to put that idealistic notion to rest!

Perhaps we mistakenly believed that religion had done its job in teaching us that everyone, *everyone* is a child of God and is thus our brother or sister. This is apparently not the case! As we are coming to realize, at the bottom, at the root of all hate is fear. Fear makes us feel weak and small and vulnerable. Hate arises within us to counter the unpleasant feeling of fear. Hate makes us feel big and strong and also right. It makes us appear bigger and stronger to others, at least to those who can't see behind the outward expression of hate to the weakness, the self-doubt, the insecurity, the feeling of inadequacy that gave rise to it. If this is true, then a first step in overcoming hatred is becoming conscious of our fears, accepting them, understanding them, and then letting Jesus help us find a different, a better way of responding to them. Because this is exactly what Jesus is trying to do!

In addition to the social fears that I mentioned, there are also other fears that we experience in our daily lives. Every day we, or at least most of us, confront fears that have the potential to rob us of our joy and our inner peace. We have fears concerning our health and the health of our loved ones. We have fears about our vulnerability to pandemics, mass shootings, war, and climate disaster. We have fears about where our nation and our world are headed. We fear our own death, the dissolution of this transient form, which may come sooner and in a more painful way than we would like. Religion addresses these fears as well. Throughout this Advent season, we will be exploring how the traditional themes of Advent, the themes of hope, peace, joy, love, and light can speak to, can help dissolve the fears that cripple us emotionally and poison our connection with life.

This morning, Emily and Meagan lit the first of our Advent candles: the candle of hope. As they told us,

Advent is a time to remember that generation after generation of men, women, and children waited for the Messiah. Finally, at the right time, God's promises to the world were fulfilled in the birth of the baby Jesus.

Advent is a time to remember that God's promises are always fulfilled, even when the wait seems long. Because of God's faithfulness, we can be a hopeful people, even in difficult times.

This is why today we light the first Advent candle, the candle of hope.

This time of year brings back memories for many of us. Sixty years ago, on November 25, 1963, the body of President John F. Kennedy was laid to rest at Arlington National Cemetery. Following the ceremony, his widow lighted an "eternal flame" at the gravesite. I have been to Arlington to pay my respects to a president I admired and to view the "eternal

flame.” I guess a part of me must long for the archetypal “Camelot” that those of us who lived in that period hoped and believed we could create.

This past week, however, as I read the morning paper, my eye was drawn to another anniversary. On November 22, 1915, fifty years after Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation and the end of the Civil War, a new version of the Ku Klux Klan, targeting Blacks, Jews, Catholics, and immigrants was founded in Connecticut by William Joseph Simmons. Mr. Simmons apparently felt that to make America great again, or to keep it safe, we needed to create an organization dedicated to the persecution and eventual elimination of African Americans, Jews, Roman Catholics, immigrants, and refugees! This is really sad! I am more convinced than ever that we still need to experience and tend that eternal flame! I hope it never goes out—because this is the eternal flame of hope! It is the hope that will keep us from giving up in our quest to become the nation and the world that God calls us to be.

Our gospel reading this morning, the story of Simeon, takes place shortly after Jesus’ birth. Simeon was a devout man who looked forward to the coming of the Messiah. Because he was exceptionally righteous, the Holy Spirit revealed to him that before he died, he would see the Messiah. When Jesus was brought into the Temple for the rites of purification, Simeon immediately realized who this baby was! His hope had been realized! He took the baby in his arms and gave thanks.

Simeon *hoped* that he would be able to experience the presence of the Messiah before he died. In this Simeon is like us. We want to experience the risen Christ both within and among us. We want Christ’s transforming presence to heal our broken nation, to heal our broken world. Deep down we know this has to begin with us. We are the carriers of hope—each of us as individuals and also as a church. This is why we long for Christ to be born again in us.

There are many times in our lives when we need to feel, to experience hope. When people are depressed, they commonly feel helpless and hopeless. They feel helpless to change the reality that is pressing in on them from either the outside or the inside. Because they feel helpless in relation to the present, they feel hopeless about the future. Many people in America and around the world feel this way. I also feel this way from time to time.

The novelist Hermann Hesse, who was strongly influenced by Jung, once said,

You are only afraid if you are not in harmony with yourself. People are afraid because they have never owned up to themselves.

When we are not be in harmony with ourselves, with our true Center, hope calls us to embark upon the search; it speaks an encouraging, a strengthening word to us; it reassures us that the search for our true Center is not a fool's errand, no matter what the skeptics might say.

The message of Christmas is a message of hope. It reminds us that we are neither helpless nor hopeless—because we are not alone in this universe. It reminds us that God became present, became incarnate in our world through Jesus. It reminds us that God is always with us, that God is nearer to us than we are to ourselves. It reminds us that even in the darkest of days, a light shines forth, a light that the darkness cannot extinguish. As Desmond Tutu has said, “Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all the darkness.”

If we have hope, we can find the strength, the courage to restore our nation and the world to sanity. We *can* create a world where *all* people can live together in peace and harmony. We can do this if we cling to the vision that was articulated so powerfully by Franklin D. Roosevelt, who said, “We have always held to the hope, the belief, the conviction that there is a better life, a better world, beyond the horizon.” Roosevelt also identified the emptiness of the fear that holds us back, that prevents us from creating the kind of world that God wants us to create when he said, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” Hope helps us move past the crippling grip of fear. As Abraham Lincoln, said, “My dream is of a place and a time where America will once again be seen as the last best hope of earth.”

The experience of hope and of a vision of a better life that come when we enter into the presence of God. when we reside in the presence of God, is not only an important theme of Advent and Christmas; it is an important part of the Sacrament of Holy Communion. The Sacrament of Holy Communion is not just a liturgy of remembrance; it is more than this. It is an experience of presence. We believe Christ can be present to us in these common elements of bread and wine if we but open our hearts in faith.

The words of our Hymn of Preparation this morning, *Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence*, speak of a Jesus who, paradoxically, is

*King of Kings, yet born of Mary,
As of old on earth He stood,
Lord of Lords, in human vesture --
In the body and the blood --
He will give to all the faithful
His own self for heavenly food.*

As we know, at the heart of every mystery is paradox. In his humanity, the divine Christ gave himself to us: his body and his blood. This is our hope and also our belief, the belief that Christ gives himself to us not only on Christmas, not only in this sacrament, but also in every moment of our daily lives. We can have that for which we, like Simeon, not only hope but

deeply long. We can receive Jesus again this Christmas, in this sacrament, and in every moment of our daily lives if we but prepare a place for him in our heart. If we can do this, we empower him to remove the fears that imprison us, the fears that poison us, our nation, and the world. And if we receive Jesus into our hearts again this Christmas, we will be able to bring our little candle of light, our little message of healing to our little corner of the world. That would be a wonderful Christmas gift!

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OUR RESPONSE TO THE WORD—A CALL TO STEWARDSHIP

The Christmas story is replete with the spirit and the act of giving. As we remember through our participation, our sharing in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, Jesus was God's gift to humanity. God became incarnate in Jesus. As a human being, he learned what it means to suffer—but he also learned what it means to love.

The story of the innkeeper of Bethlehem reminds us that God needs a place to be born, to be reborn in our world in our time. That place, that humble stable, is us. It is within our hearts. By taking Jesus into our hearts, by giving him a place to be born, a place to dwell, we are offering God the greatest gift of all.

Let us consecrate our morning offering, the many gifts we share with this church, with each other, and with the world in our Prayer of Dedication.