

“The World as It Might Be”
December 19, 2021

Micah 5:1-5
Luke 1:39-45

In recent years, as Advent and Christmas approached, I’ve asked people what they need in their church life and in worship during these days. Each year the response changes.

One year you cried out: “Give us carols. The herald angels sing ‘Hark!’ and we don’t want to wait until Christmas Eve to join in that song.”

Last year people said: “Give us hope,” which was understandable given that we were some nine months into the pandemic. There was, of course, the glimmer of hope as the first vaccines were making their way into the arms of people—but we wanted more.

This year what I’ve heard the most is: “Give us joy.” And, again, that’s understandable. We continue to live in incredibly difficult, trying times and it seems as though that’s going to be the case for some time to come. The joy that we traditionally associate with these December days would be a welcome change from what we’ve been experiencing.

Give us joy.

Samuel Miller, once the dean at Harvard Divinity School asked for all of us: “How shall the heart, bearing its burden of loneliness and shame and grief, sing the songs of Christmas gladness?” That is the challenge we face this year.

“The truth is,” Miller added, “we *need* Christmas. We need it so deeply, so desperately, that we will celebrate it though our hearts wear sackcloth and ashes. We will celebrate ‘something’ in it that the world and all its fury cannot dim or obliterate. We will keep it as a ‘sign,’ a sign that we believe in a world of ‘peace on earth, good will to [all],’ though all appearances are against it. Fundamentally and ultimately, we believe that God will not forsake us, even at our worst. We have a hope—a star over the new born child.”

Even in the worst of times the hope remains that God will be present as a shield, a comfort, a shepherd. Even in the worst of times, the hope remains that God is giving birth to a new possibility—the reconciliation of God and humankind.

And in that hope and possibility, we find the joy that we seek. The British choral composer John Rutter, who created last Sunday’s brilliant *Gloria*, finds hints of this joy in the music of Christmas. “With music,” he says, “your Christmas can always be perfect. With real-life Christmas, there’s always something that’s going to go a bit wrong. You’re hoping it’s going to snow on Christmas day, but it doesn’t. Or your turkey smells absolutely gorgeous, but it turns out that it’s a bit burned when you come to eat it. But the music of Christmas is always perfect.” Maybe you have a sense of what he means—and we certainly had evidence of this last Sunday in music that came as close to perfection as humanly possible.

Rutter adds: “I love Christmas. It’s the child in me. Maybe I’ve never quite grown up. I still feel just for those few magic days a year, that we have the world as it might be.”

In Luke’s gospel, we hear Mary tell of the world as it might be, the world as God will one day make it. Her song speaks of the deep human hope—and perhaps of deep human fear:

God has shown strength...[and] scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

God has brought down the powerful...and lifted up the lowly;

God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

Catching a glimpse of this new possibility, Mary sings: “My spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

Joy is indeed the good news of these days—and all days: One of the main reasons for you to be alive is so that you can find joy in God.

You’re not alive to be overworked and burned out.

You’re not alive to carry the burden of guilt.

You’re not alive to bear the weight of the world.

You have been given the gift of life so that you might find joy.

Christmas does indeed offer us the world as it might be. But this is far more than magical thinking. These days are not for children alone but for the often weary and jaded adults that we have become. We hear the good news that God is still at work in the world, so that the world that *is* more and more becomes the world as it *might be*.

Yes, we are still waiting—still waiting for the *advent* of God—centuries after the birth of Jesus. All our preparation to mark that birth, the exhilaration that is sometimes felt, the joyful expectancy of children—all are echoes of the active waiting that continues.

In the days ahead, we draw closer to the heart of the joy of this season. God moves toward humankind in Jesus Christ, reconciling a waiting world, redeeming all creation.

And what place does God choose for a beacon of this joy? The least likely of places: Bethlehem.

When God chooses the least likely—whether that is Bethlehem and Mary or you and me—nothing stays the same. The weak become strong; the hungry are filled with good things. What seems absolutely impossible is presented to the world as a sign of God’s love.

Madeleine Le’Engle once said: “We are all asked to do more than we can do.”¹

We are.

Over and over, we discover this in the stories of scripture. Over and over, we discover it in our own lives. All of us have discovered this anew in the past two years. At some point we come to the limit of our abilities.

Just at that point, something—life or circumstances, desire or God—something calls us beyond those limits. Our inability becomes an opportunity for greater achievement. Our inability becomes the opportunity for even greater action.

No wonder the hopes and fears seem to be met in that little town of Bethlehem. The God who uses the least likely, the insignificant, does not keep us that way.

I'm left listening to the strange news about Bethlehem and wondering: How will God use this small congregation to announce good news to a world so troubled in so many ways? And how will we be transformed in the process?

Let us in the days ahead, once more tune our voices to sing of joy and faith.

Let us train our lives to show love and mercy.

Let us shape our world into a place of justice and peace.

Let us look again with wonder as God incarnate in Jesus recreates our lives and makes the world as it might be.

In the coming year, let us allow God to work among us in surprising and unexpected ways.

In the coming year, let us allow God to transform what is weak within you and me into new strength.

Our message is still that the Christ has come from Bethlehem; in that little town something amazing happened. God has come to the besieged city, has joined the besieged soul. The shepherd, the one of peace, is Jesus of Nazareth.

We asked for it—and we have received it: Joy.

Joy to the world.

The Lord has come.

¹ Madeleine L'Engle, *Miracle on 10th Street*, pg. 71.