

Finding God in Dark Places

OT Reading: Isaiah 9:2; 6-7

Gospel: Luke 2:1-14

Christmas Eve

In December 1943, the German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a letter to his parents from his prison cell in Berlin, where he had been held since April of that year. He had hoped to be released in time to celebrate Christmas with his family, but that was not to be. So he wrote:

“Dear Parents, you must not think that I will let myself sink into depression during this lonely Christmas. It will take its own special place in a series of very different Christmases that I have celebrated. I need not tell you how great my longing for freedom for all of you is. But you have for so many decades provided us with Christmases so incomparably beautiful that the memories of them are strong enough to outshine even a dark Christmas”.

Hold onto that image of a man in prison longing to be with his family, but finding solace and grace in memories of past Christmases. Bonhoeffer also wanted to assure his parents, sick with worry that he was alright. He continued:

“From a Christian point of view, a Christmas in a prison cell is no special problem. It will probably be celebrated here, in this house more sincerely and with more meaning than outside, where the holiday may be observed in name only. That God turns directly toward the place where people are careful to turn away, that Christ was born in a stable because he found no room at the inn. Prisoners grasp that better than others. For them, it is a joyous occasion”.

Of course Bonhoeffer was not suggesting that it was better to celebrate Christmas in prison, simply that the meaning of Jesus’ birth holds true, even there, perhaps especially there. And perhaps instinctively we also know this to be true. We know for ourselves that wherever we may stand in the gap between the way things are and our hope for what might be, Christ comes with the persistence of hope to the margins of society.

We can all agree that this past year has been anything but normal. Locked in our bubbles, often lonely, unable to visit friends or to move about freely, some locked in care homes or hospitals; others locked out of hospitals unable to visit loved ones; even locked behind those wretched masks creates the image of imprisonment. For many people this has been a dark year. But tonight Christ comes and makes his home with us and within us, the light that shows up in the darkest places; in the places where love is needed most.

Darkness is not foreign to the nativity story. Scripture tells us that Jesus’ birth was not only a time of joy and welcome, but also of fear, violence and tragedy. There is a tendency to smooth over those bits as we hear the story read

in church or watch the children's nativity plays. "No room at the inn" is often played as a comedy, rather than a terrifying situation for a pregnant mother and her husband. We push into the background the presence of Augustus Caesar, with his ruthless and absolute power over the Roman Empire and its people; and we gloss over King Herod and his threats, the massacre of the Holy Innocents and the flight into Egypt.

This year, however, those grim scenes become more realistic. They sound less like a tale of long ago or a news report from another country, and more like current or near-possible events. And in some way I find this heartening, because it tells me that even in these difficult and unpredictable times Christ refuses to be shut out. He comes knocking on the doors of our anxiety and pushing through the boundaries of our loneliness, bringing hope and the assurance that in the midst of all that we have lost and all that we are holding on to, we can find joy in memories of past Christmases and hope for those yet to come.

As presiding Bishop Curry said recently, "The truth of Christmas may be more profoundly true for us this year, because so much has been stripped away, but we're not helpless; we're not alone. There is a God who cares enough to come into our world".

Early in his ministry, Jesus spoke these words from the prophet Isaiah:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

Isaiah 61:1-2a

The child that comes to us tonight is not that articulate. He can only cry for his mother's comfort or curl his tiny fingers around one of Joseph's large, work worn ones. But those words are forming within him, along with many others, so that when he speaks them we will not only hear them coming out of his mouth but see them in his life – a life given to the whole world, that all might be free.

Christmas is about a baby born in a stable, with angels and shepherds and wise men. But Christmas is also about the real world into which this baby was born, with its suffering and dying and heartache. Then as now, this birth did not occur when all was well, people were contented and no one was hungry. This child was born into the midst of the world's conflict and pain. Tonight we encounter a power that brings peace not apart from the world, but right bang in the middle of it. This birth is a demonstration of God's everlasting presence among us, the hope that he brings and the reassurance that pain and destruction

does not have the last word. God, who brings peace in the midst of the world's woes is the last word – the Word that became flesh and lived among us.

So as we come together - virtually or otherwise - on this most holy night let us rejoice, sing (in as much as we are allowed), remember the story, and be glad with our families and friends far and near, and with God, who comes to us in the child born this night, bringing peace on earth and good will to all.

Amen

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