

The Beyond in the Midst of Life  
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church  
December 21, 2008

Scripture: Luke 1:47-55

Every Advent has its recognizable elements. We light the Advent wreath and we sing the Christmas hymns and carols that we love. At Caldwell, we share poinsettias with each other and, as you can see, this year you were very generous. There are 86 in the sanctuary today, twice what we had last year, and they look great.

Also this Advent at Caldwell, we have heard four different African-American spirituals that relate to Advent. Gospel music rooted in the African-American tradition lies at the heart of our music and worship here.

Spirituals are a uniquely American blend of music, what one expert calls “a true coming together of African and European creativity with a value system that is based on the experience of African people enslaved on American soil.”

Like others, the spiritual we heard today, Go Tell It on the Mountain, expresses a theology that reflects the African slaves’ view of God as a God of mercy, justice and love in a world that for them was cruel and unjust. One hundred years after the liberation of the slaves, civil rights workers used this same spiritual to inspire their movement.

Both the slaves in the fields and the champions of their descendents believed their day of deliverance would come, even when their circumstances offered few reasons for hope. Whether picking cotton in bondage or trying to loose the bonds of segregation and discrimination, they sang spirituals to transcend their present challenges and sorrows and to be sustained by expressions of a faith they knew would one day deliver them.

In their own ways, they sang a Christmas faith, a belief that the gift of Emanuel, God with us, was, as theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer once put it, to experience “the beyond in the midst of life.”

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God has a funny way of changing the meaning of time for those who believe.

For us Presbyterians, perhaps the most troublesome theological issue related to time is the “P” word. That’s right, I said it. Predestination, both the bane and the blessing of being Presbyterian.

Raise your hand if this has happened to you. You’re at a party or some social gathering. Someone finds out you’re a Presbyterian. They get that look in their eye and you know what’s coming next.

“Oh,” they say, “you’re the ones that believe that God has already decided everything about your life, so it doesn’t matter what you do.”

Then the real smart alecks take it a step further. They’ll say something like: “Well, if you’re in tight with God, and God has already decided how everything is going to work out, maybe you can tell me if I should buy IBM stock.”

That, of course, is not the right way to think about it. Predestination is not pre-determinism, the belief that every daily detail of our lives is already fixed. Nor is it the belief that God has set a grand plan in motion and retired to the Bahamas, staying out of our lives, and letting us stumble through as best we can.

Both of these ways of thinking miss an understanding of grace. And both insist on imposing our understanding of time on our sovereign God, who, after all, created time in the first place, along with everything else in the universe.

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The Bible is full of gentle reminders of how God uses time on God’s terms and, believe it or not, our text from Luke today, Mary’s joyous song called the Magnificat, is one such example. (I bet you wondered where I was headed with all of this.)

We know the Magnificat from so many Christmases past. Mary has been visited by an angel and told she will bear God’s own son. She offers a song of praise to God for acting in such un-expectable, inexplicable ways, just as Miriam, Deborah and Hannah had done at other key moments in the history of God’s people.

The twist in time comes there in the second stanza. Pregnant not just with the Christ but with the hope of reassurance that God is at work, Mary sees a vision of a fairer and more equitable world resulting from what God is *about* to do. But she speaks as if it has *already* been accomplished.

“God has shown strength with God’s arm; God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. God has helped God’s servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise God made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendents forever.”

Luke 1:51-55

So, is God going *to do* these things? Or are they *already* done?

The answer, according to the text, is “yes.” (And you might have thought understanding predestination gave you a headache.)

In recounting Mary’s words, the author of Luke uses a Greek verb tense that we do not have in modern English. Combined with the power of Mary’s faith, these verses speak to Mary’s listeners then – and to us now – about the already but not yet. In the words of one commentator, her words “pull a future vision into the present.”

That’s the way it is with God and time. God sees the outcome. Sometimes, on our best days, we catch glimpse of things to come in the here and now. We see what Bonhoeffer called “the beyond in the midst of life.” Other times, we miss it. Perhaps because we aren’t watching closely enough. Or we are looking in the wrong direction. Or, perhaps, we are paying attention only to what we are doing and not God.

Once again, we are reminded that we live in in-between times. God in Christ has come to set things in motion and Christ will come again to usher in God’s kingdom in completion.

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Perhaps what we might pray for hardest this Christmas is to see things as Mary saw them.

We might think that may be difficult for some of us. In verse 48, Mary describes herself as “lowly,” which most scholars read to mean of a working or slave class. In the Magnificat, we can hear Mary’s great surprise that God has “found favor” with her, of all people, signaling to generations to come that God has a way of shattering the status quo and using those we least expect.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century poet James Russell Lowell wrote a work called “His Throne is with the Outcast” reflecting God’s orientation to what the Gospel of Luke calls “the lowly.” The poem reads:

I followed where they led,  
    And in a hovel rude,  
With naught to fence the weather from his head  
    The King I sought for meekly stood;

A naked hungry child  
    Clung round his gracious knee,  
And a poor hunted slave looked up and smiled  
    To bless the smile that set him free;

New miracles I saw his presence do,  
    No more I knew the hovel bare and poor,  
The gathered chips into a woodpile grew  
    The broken morsel swelled to goodly store.

I knelt and wept: my Christ no more I seek.  
His throne is with the outcast and the weak.

What, then, of those of us who have not personally known this kind of economic oppression? Can we see the world as Mary does? Can we who are not lowly in station proclaim with any integrity at all that we know the full measure of God’s grace?

Surely the answer is “yes.”

Regardless of what kind of home we live in or whether we have any money in the bank, each of us knows suffering of other kinds – the oppression of pain and disease, the lowliness of doubt and insecurity, the abandonment of loneliness, the disappointment that inevitably figures into family, especially at this time of year, and the dislocation of our hopes and dreams from events we could have never expected.

To be sure, Mary’s song is, first and foremost, God’s vision for the world. It calls us to live into God’s will for the world, to work as the Body of Christ to hasten such a just and fair world wherever and whenever we can.

But Mary’s song of the already-in-the-not-yet also reminds us that we don’t understand God’s timeline. We’re just not equipped to.

That may be unsettling for those of us who want to see things in a particular way, those of us who are weary of the injustices of the world, whether it is the hunger, the war and the genocide we see around the world or the chronic homelessness of the men who slip behind the bushes to sleep in the park next door on cold nights or, sometimes even in the very courtyard of our church.

Somehow, somehow, the slaves sang their spirituals with confident faith in a God that would one day prevail. Somehow, they could see the beyond in the midst of their lives. So, too, we might pray that, like the slaves and like Mary, we can find peace in our own glimpses of the beyond in the midst of our lives, even as we are called to wrestle with our present challenges and injustices.

The magic of Advent is that, in that funny way God uses time, we wait for something that is already accomplished ... the birth of our Lord and the glorious beginning of the end of the status quo. And, once again, the wait is now almost over. Thus we can sing the words of the spiritual that express such profound truth in such clear and simple language:

Down in a lowly manger  
The humble Christ was born,  
And God sent us salvation  
That blessed Christmas morn.

Go, tell it on the mountain,  
Over the hills and ev'rywhere  
Go, tell it on the mountain,  
That Jesus Christ was born.

Amen.