

Christmas in the Real World
Blue Christmas Service
December 15, 2012
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
Rev. John Cleghorn

Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 40
New Testament Readings: Matthew 1:18-24, 2:7-23

Tonight we come to confess that not everything about this season is full of joy and wonder. I mean that word “confess” in the Presbyterian way. I don’t mean we are guilty of something, some deep dark secret, something for which we should repent or apologize. Quite the opposite. We are here to claim in front of God and each other how we feel. We’re here to put our feelings of grief and sadness out there as real and legitimate and worthy of our God’s attention.

We are, by no means, the first to do so. In fact, whatever conflicted emotions we feel in this season are as old as the season itself. As we heard in our readings, there were some parts of the story of the first Christmas that are not an all happy. That’s because it’s a story about life in the real world.

From the Gospel of Matthew we heard about Joseph’s predicament. The woman he is engaged to is suddenly announced to be pregnant. From out of nowhere he is faced with public embarrassment and scandal. All he can do is plan to break the engagement privately. A young man’s dream of living happily ever after with his newfound love is shot, and he had nothing to do with the reasons.

Joseph’s experience really only mirrors what Mary had already gone through. While we may know well her sense of wonder and awe expressed in her song, the Magnificat, she would have had every right to her own sense of confusion and concern about what others would think. After all, she lived in the real world, too.

Then there were the socio-political realities of their times. Their country was under Roman occupation. King Herod, who ruled Palestine for the Romans, was known for his cruelty. He was also insecure, conniving and duplicitous. As we read in Matthew’s account, Herod sent out emissaries to greet the newborn king with gifts and favors. But it was all really a trick to find out where he could send his hit men to quietly eliminate any threat this rumored infant king might pose to his powerbase.

All in all, not exactly ideal conditions for bringing a child into the world. It was Christmas in the real world then, just as it is for us today.

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Each of us comes here tonight for our own reasons. Others may know our reasons or not. We may be living a fairly public grief or a very private one. Maybe some of us aren't even sure why we are here tonight. Perhaps it just felt right to come.

As with Mary and Joseph, perhaps our personal or family lives are in some state of imbalance or imbalance. We may feel as though God stands at a distance, keeping us in the dark about the reasons for our sense of loss and grief and lost-ness. Or, to the contrary, we may come here with our hearts full of questions for God, hard questions, perhaps. We may come wanting an explanation from the God whom we call sovereign. After all, as we just said in our affirmation of faith last Sunday from the Heidelberg Catechism, "not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven." So, whatever brings us here, God is in some way part of the picture.

Some of us, on the other hand, may be here because of a general sense of despair about the state of things, the state of our world, which has plenty of its own turmoil. The North Koreans are flexing their military muscle. The Middle East seems to be spiraling out of control after the promise of an Arab spring.

Our elected leaders in Washington are intent on taking us to the very edge of the fiscal cliff ... if not over it, all out their petty inabilities to find common ground. Civil discourse seems dead, the common good an anachronism. Oh, we have our reasons for being here. It may be Christmas, but it's Christmas in the real world, 2012.

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Father Richard Rohr is a Franciscan priest, ecumenical writer and spiritual guide. In the book of devotions that our Sunday school class is following this Advent, he has this to say:

"The darkness will never totally go away. I've worked long enough in ministry to know that darkness isn't going disappear, but that, as John's Gospel says, "the light shines on the inside of the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it." (1:5) Such is the Christian form of yin-yang, our own belief in paradox and mystery."

"We must all hope and work to eliminate darkness, especially in many of the great social issues of our time. We wish world hunger could be eliminated. We wish we could stop wasting the earth's resources on armaments. We wish we could stop killing people from womb to tomb.

"But at a certain point, we have to surrender to the fact that the darkness has always been here, and the only real question is how to receive the light and spread the light. That is not capitulation any more than the cross was capitulation. It is real transformation into the absolutely unique character and program of the Risen Christ

“Our Christian wisdom is to name the darkness as darkness and the Light as light, and to learn how to live and work in the Light so that the darkness does not overcome us. If we have a pie-in-the-sky, everything-is-beautiful attitude, we are in fact going to be trapped by the darkness because we are not seeing clearly enough Conversely, if we can only see the darkness and forget the more foundational Light, we will be destroyed by our negativity and fanaticism, or we will naively think we are apart from the darkness.

“Instead, we must wait and work with hope inside of the darkness – while never doubting the light that God always is – and that we are, too (Matthew 5:14). That is the narrow birth canal of God into the world – through the darkness and into an even Greater Light.”¹

Thus, Rohr says, we can be reborn. Yes, even you and even me. Even now in this season when our pain sometimes feels as if it will defeat us. It won't, because the light cannot overcome the darkness. In Mary and Joseph's day, God transformed the darkness of their circumstances into a birth canal, as Rohr put it. God came into the world in Christ Jesus, in whom God felt every emotion we can ever experience and, at the end, defeated death for all.

Tonight, we confess it's Christmas in the real world. At the same time, we claim and proclaim God's promise to see us through. God invites us to look into whatever darkness surrounds us and to say to ourselves and others that it is not a black hole that will consume us. Rather, it is a birth canal through which we can be reborn, made new, not the same as before, but perhaps, by God's strength and grace, even more equipped to live and work in the Light and extend the Light to others.

Amen

¹ Preparing for Christmas with Richard Rohr, p.22-24