

Christmas Eve

Luke 2.1-20

Sunday, December 24, 2017

If you remember nothing else from this evening and Christmas going forward, remember this: *Jesus did not come to change the mind of God about humanity; Jesus came to change the mind of humanity about God.*

We all have our favorite Christmas movies. Right? What's yours? Do you prefer the classics like *It's a Wonderful Life*, *A Christmas Carol*, or *White Christmas*? Or do you enjoy the absurd comedies like *National Lampoons Christmas*, *Scrooged*, or *Elf*? Are you a little more refined and seek out rom/coms like *Love, Actually* or *Four Christmases*? A favorite that resurfaced this year for us was *The Family Stone*. Much of the movie focuses on the awkward and, thus, entertaining experiences of Sarah Jessica Parker's uptight and controlling character, Meredith Morton, as she meets her boyfriend's eccentric and outgoing family at Christmas.

However, behind the humor and playfulness, the movie teems with pathos as the matriarch of the family--Sybil Stone--played by Diane Keaton, oversees what will be her last Christmas due to a terminal illness. Throughout, Meredith can seemingly do nothing right and feels more and more alienated from the Stone family. Yet, in perhaps the most moving moment of the movie, Meredith, notwithstanding all the miscues and mistakes and missteps, presents a gift to each of the children Stone. It is a framed and enlarged photograph of their mother as a young woman, visibly pregnant, and seated in a chair bathed in light. The family is stunned. In that moment, time stops as does the chaos and craziness. Silence fills

the room, broken only by Sybil's benediction, "You did good, kid." The perfect gift from the most unlikely and unwitting character.

I love that scene and the movie. For I think that it is expressive of what we all must experience at any and many points in life. While Meredith's character is overstated and a bit hyperbolic, there is a little Meredith in each of us longing for love. Seeking acceptance. Trying to control the chaos around us so that we feel as if we are in control. And all because we can't concoct love, nor can we fabricate acceptance, nor can we control the myriad moments and events and issues that impinge upon our life. And, yet, in the midst of our limits and striving, there exist those serendipitous moments where we stumble into the right thing. And for the moment there is peace and, what really undergirds it all, grace. From time to time, we stumble into offering the perfect gift.

Which, perhaps, is an appropriate image for Christmas: stumbling into the perfect gift. Could it be that stumbling into the right thing amidst all the failures and flaws and faults that mark our life and our world is at the very heart of Christmas? Moreover, the irony is that we acknowledge the gift of this holiday is not the one that we provide but the one that God offers, and far from the most obvious and natural present, the offering is a profound surprise and mystery. To follow the comparison, the perfect gift comes from the most unlikely character. Indeed, perhaps, it is God's stumbling into something that is amazingly beautiful and grace-filled.

For when you consider what we observe, it is a bit absurd.. The story has been told so many times that we may have lost sight of the strangeness of it. The divine

infinity not only embodies our existence, our finitude but does so in a most peculiar and awkward way. There is no divine declaration. No pillar of fire. No mountains being split in two. No incontrovertible revelation that this is true. Rather, the very opposite seems to be afoot. Nothing is reasonable or noteworthy or authenticated. We don't even know when Jesus was born. And the backstory is hardly one that engenders confidence. An unwed, teenage girl, part of a religious minority, travels to pay a tax to the powerful Roman occupiers, in a backwater of Palestine, and gives birth to a baby placed in a box where livestock eat straw and hay, and the first witnesses are the derelicts of society (also known as shepherds).

Hardly the trailer that you would use for a marketing campaign of how powerful and true this story really is. Indeed, humans have been running from such a story for millennia. We don't want to be vulnerable. We don't aspire to lowness. We can't abide marginalization. The power, the force, the might of the Roman rule is the model for where the gods reside and how they act. Thus, it is no coincidence that the Caesars were considered divine. Yet, in the vulnerability and weakness of a poor, homeless, infant child, we say that the divine infinity enters into our finiteness and things are never the same.

Thus, the lyric from a Bruce Cockburn song sets the reality and absurdity of what we believe transpires in this incarnational stumbling:

*Like a stone on the surface of a still river
Driving the ripples on forever
Redemption rips through the surface of time
In the cry of a tiny babe.*

Which, ironically, is the best news. Of course, the tradition has twisted and corrupted the narrative so that many proclaim, without the hint of irony, that the birth narrative is the most obvious activity of God and the natural response of the divine to take care of our human problems. But remember: *Jesus did not come to change the mind of God about humanity; Jesus came to change the mind of humanity about God.* And what is changed is the very nature of the God who meets us in a child. God is not only the All-Mighty, but in the very heart of the incarnation the mystery of God it is paradoxically revealed that God is also--and at the same time--All-Vulnerable. God enters into our hopes and fears, our joys and our longings, our triumphs and our foibles and pronounces to each and everyone, "You did good, kid." Or another way to frame it, "I love you."

Thus, the gift of Jesus is the divine entering into our reality to express the fullness and mystery and Love of God present always and in all things. Rather than being an ogre, God is Love. Rather than being sinners in the hands of an angry God, we are inherently and forever loved by God, no matter what we do or don't do. Rather than climbing to success, we rest in the acceptance and grace of the divine who comes down into our reality. Rather than need to always control the world around us, we are invited to keep opening the gift that proclaims that there is nothing in all creation that can ever separate us from God's love. Thus, the gift that is offered this eve and every moment is to open up your life, live more fully into who you are to be, and trust that you are the beloved of God ever and always. Not a bad gift to stumble into, right? Maybe the perfect gift!