

“On Becoming Christmas”
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23 December 2018

Luke 1:46b-55 (Canticle of Mary/*Magnificat*) Micah 5:2-5a Luke 1:39-45

The overarching theme for Advent this year is “Find Joy This Christmas,” and I was reminded this week that every one of those words may be challenging for us. If life has been hard on you or somebody you love, well, trying to “find” something, anything, may be just too much right now. After I invited us a few weeks ago to spend time noticing a tightly wrapped bud on a rhododendron, because Jesus said that summer is nearer than we think, one of you said that you didn’t have a rhododendron at home and it was too much to go looking for one. And joy? Well, when we are struggling to notice even the tiniest sign of renewal and hope, joy seems out of the question. I suspect that some of you may feel like Israel of old these days, like feeling “unswaddled.” If you have not been feeling the warmth of God’s refining fire or the enhancing power of fuller’s soap, well, maybe you are already looking past “This Christmas” and are longing for next Christmas.

But whether this year or next year, today, I hope we can agree that together we can participate in what is “becoming Christmas.” I’m borrowing this phrase from Kayla McClurg, from a reflection we pondered on Tuesday at Morning Prayer. Maybe Christmas isn’t so much an end point or a destination but a process, the divine program by which God is always coming to us. The eternal now of ongoing engagement? In her canticle called the *Magnificat*, I know that Mary breaks out in holy song about feeling favored, but her verb tenses are all mixed up, and maybe this is no accident. She sings as if the past and the future are somehow contained in the present. Mary sings “ahead of time,” before anything good comes out of this unplanned pregnancy. Luke tells us that it is Mary’s soul that sings, maybe because her mind was overwhelmed with what any 13-year-old unwed girl would be worrying about.

But before Mary’s soul sang, a woman named Hannah offered a song: “Oh my heart exults in the Lord, who will raise up the poor from the dust...from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes.” (1 Samuel 2:1-10) But scholars tell us that Hannah didn’t create her song out of whole cloth any more than Mary did. Hannah improvised on the pattern of an even older melody found in the song of Miriam. In Exodus chapter 15, we read that Miriam sings after the Israelites cross the Red Sea: “Oh, sing to the Lord, for the Lord is highly exalted. The horse and his rider God has hurled into the sea!” (15:21) There seems to be a pattern to soul singing. First, give thanks when things are falling apart; second, declare God’s triumph even if we cannot foresee how it will come about; and, we should take note of God’s fondness of frustrating the greedy desires of anybody who is greedy, ourselves included. Cue Ebenezer Scrooge or Henry F. Potter. Remember?

Look – regardless of what we are worrying about as we make our way to Christmas, I want to believe that Mary wants us to sing our souls. Even if we cannot sing solos this year, songs of our individual joys, maybe we can sing, together, our collective soul. Together, we can always sing a soulful song, because pregnancy is not a solitary gift meant to be sung alone, but something that must be shared. I want to believe that Mary wants us to sing, because time is pregnant with purpose and power, which means we are pregnant with possibility. I’m not talking about biology, but something even deeper in our psyche, in the makeup of what it means to be church, the body of Christ. Remember what happens after the announcement of Mary’s pregnancy? We

are told that she seeks out “with haste” Elizabeth, her cousin, during the last trimester of Elizabeth’s pregnancy. With Elizabeth, Mary is safe, cared for, defended against those who would doubt her experience and question her story, and this, no doubt, helps her find her soul voice. Three months? The number three has long been a sign and time of transformation. Think of Jonah, who flees God and is in the belly of the Great Fish for three days. Think of Paul, studying for three years before beginning his ministry. And Jesus? Think of his three years of ministry that prove to be enough to change the world as we know it. Three hours on the cross; three days entombed before resurrection.

Counting today and Christmas Day, well, we have three days. Three days to find joy this Christmas. But since Christmas is a season, not just a day, we have 15 days, counting today and Epiphany Sunday on January 6, to find joy this Christmas. And if we can’t find the joy we would want in our individual lives? Well, we can still participate in holding space for the joy that we will eventually find. If we will sing our collective soul, we, together, grow pregnant with possibility; our individual lives become larger than they would otherwise be. Truth be told, real strength, for the long haul, is rarely recognized in our individual accomplishments, but in finding our place in the larger work that God is doing. Larger lives, not easier, simpler lives; not pain-free lives, any mother will tell you that. When in our collective soul we magnify the Lord, we end up singing songs that only make sense in a birthing room.

The medieval mystic Meister Eckhart suggested that in a mysterious way we are all meant to be “mothers of God.” Are you willing to be pregnant, if we all are pregnant together? Eckhart writes:

“For what good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within myself? And what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture?”

What Eckhart is suggesting is bold and borders on the outrageous, but it is somehow the truth of the matter. The fullness of time has come, is “be-coming,” say the scriptures, and it is closely linked to the strange event of the Divine being born in you and in me.

Juli and I watched “It’s a Wonderful Life” on Friday; James Stewart and Donna Reed were as good as I had remembered. Of course, for much of the movie George Bailey’s life was not wonderful. I still love the scene in his local watering hole when he is punched in the nose by the husband of one of his five children’s teachers, who George had earlier berated over the telephone. And the scene that follows, now rather drunk, that he finds the courage to head to a bridge in the hopes of jumping off. On that night, his life was not wonderful. Oh, Poor Uncle Billy, who loses the \$8,000. And mean old Potter who finds and keeps the money, and not only acts as if he doesn’t have it, but implies that George is a crook and unworthy of assistance and unwanted in Bedford Falls.

Every time I watch it, I want to scream: “Old man Potter has the money, George; he’s had it all along! Don’t give up, George!” It is the collective voice that I want to sound, the warning about greed that I want us to sing, to somehow tip the scale in George’s favor. In the end, it is “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” that everybody sings, a collective soul song? If they weren’t singing in unison, they would sound like a choir, singing in George’s presence thanks to Clarence Odbody, Angel 2nd Class, who reminds George that he is favored and worthy to be an earthy container of the true meaning of Christmas.

I want to believe that you are my choir, that I am in yours, and that we will sing together, this Christmas. So, greetings, you favored ones. Something wants to leap with joy in our collective soul; something holy in our midst seeks to dance at the sound of a familiar voice. The Lord is with us, oh do not be afraid. Nothing is impossible with God. Amen.