

A Newborn King

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Isaiah 6:1-8, Mark 1:1-15, Luke 1:26-38

It's getting harder and harder for me to say good-bye to Christmas. Perhaps because the biblical stories that surround the season are so moving and powerful. For many, it's a season of mixed emotions. There are moments of great generosity – both in spirit and pocketbook. It is also coupled with the darkest time of year. The nights have turned cold in the northern hemisphere and the homeless shelters are crowded, and yet meals are plentiful. It is a season that is punctuated in time. A time when we remember the good times and the bad. A time of high expectations, sometimes met with disappointment on many levels. It is hard not to think of those that are no longer with us and yet we marvel at the children in our midst. For many, the commercialization overrides the potential feelings of joy. And yet, Christmas has the ability to break through anyway. We find ourselves wishing that the true spirit of Christmas could linger with us throughout the year.

With each new year, we have a chance to reflect on how we spent our time over the last twelve months. We have an opportunity to get rid of unwanted habits and contemplate the possibility of a fresh start. My aunt, who was also my Godmother, passed away a year ago at the age of 97. She had a very large spirit, a great sense of humor and a deep Christian faith. For many years, we had lunch every Wednesday and then went shopping for groceries. She had been a victim of polio as a child and in later years, she used a walker. In her mid-nineties, she often opted to stay in the car while I shopped. With a twinkle in her eyes, she would say, "I think I'll just stay in the car and review my sins." Although she said this somewhat in jest, I knew that she made this particular activity a part of her spiritual life. I would say if we extend this thinking a little further, we could say, what does this mean for Christians in general? Are we allowing time to review our sins? What is keeping us away from a full life with the Spirit? What habits do we need to shed and what can we eagerly embrace?

I had a class at Fuller Theological Seminary last summer that was taught by John Goldingay, a world renown expert on the Old Testament. Somewhere around mid-way through the first class, he announced to a room packed with seminary students that the Church in the United States will be dead in the next 20 years. Everyone's jaws dropped as he proceeded to explain his reasoning. He said that the Church has become so absorbed into the culture

that if this trend continues, the Church as it has been in the past will no longer be recognizable. This is not true in other parts of the world, like Africa, for instance, where vast numbers are receiving baptism into the Christian faith on a daily basis. Goldingay said that it is necessary for all of us to make sure that two things happen when we come together to worship God. First, we need to make sure that we can hear scripture. Saint Augustine often said, when in doubt and you don't know what to preach, read scripture so that God can be heard. Second, Goldingay said that we need to be sure that our worship service is about God, not about us. It is not supposed to be about what can we gain from our worship experience, but rather how can we make ourselves available for service to God. Our culture has become so absorbed with 'what's in it for me' that we need to switch our thinking to how can we best serve God. What does God want, not what do we want from Him? This is the essence of our Christian tradition.

As the new year approaches, how can we best serve God, both individually and together. The three scripture readings provide many clues. Chapter 6 of Isaiah is quite possibly one of the most dramatic scenes in the Bible. Isaiah is about to receive his commission by God to become his voice to the people of Israel. It was in the year that King Uzziah died when Isaiah saw the Lord sitting on a throne high and lofty. Just the hem of his robe filled the entire temple. There were 6 seraphs in attendance above Isaiah and each had six wings. With two wings they covered their faces and with two they covered their feet and with two they flew calling to one another saying: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." Overcome, Isaiah says: "woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" Like many of us, Isaiah feels unworthy to be in the presence of the Lord. From our own perspective, we know that our conversations have not always been what they could be. We have said things that we regret and not said things that have harbored resentments in us. It seems that the first step is awareness and a desire for a change in our behavior. On his own Isaiah would never have felt worthy, just as it is difficult for us to feel the true depth of God's love. But because of Isaiah's awareness of his sins, God sent a seraph with a live coal to touch his lips and in this act, his guilt departed and his sin was blotted out. It appears that our first step in service to our Lord is

awareness of our sins. The second step is purification by the grace of God, not by our own doing. It is at this point in scripture that God says in a room filled with the smoke of purification, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” No longer lost, and now unburdened by guilt, Isaiah says, “Here I am; send me!”

In the second scripture reading, we turn to the first chapter in the Gospel of Mark. It is important to remember the time in which this gospel was written. Most scholars consider Mark’s Gospel to be the earliest of the four. It was written at a time when the Church was not yet organized. The early church was pragmatic and visceral. Mainly, it was inclusive. All were welcome. Mark was excited. He couldn’t wait to let people know what had happened. He begins with a quote from Isaiah which includes: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’ This is Mark’s Christmas story. Something is about to happen. The Spirit that has been seeking relationship with humankind since the beginning is about to make himself known. As Jesus was being baptized by John in the Jordan, something miraculous happened. As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descended like a dove on him. “And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” We then read that the Spirit immediately drives Jesus out into the wilderness for forty days where he was tempted by Satan and he was with wild beasts, and the angels waited on him.” Mark wants us to know that it has not been God that was against us all along, but rather Satan.

It was a new understanding. The comment that I hear most often from people that no longer embrace the Church is this: ‘If God is so good, why is there such evil in the world?’ Why does God allow malaria and A.I.D.s to be so prevalent in Africa? Why are there people starving and stuck in the Sudan? Why are people starving in India or living in desperate situations throughout the world? Why is homelessness so prevalent in the United States? Why did God allow the economy to collapse? Why isn’t God responding? Mark wants us to know that there is an additional force working against the goodness of God. A force that tried to tempt Jesus too. A force so powerful that the angels needed to wait on him when Satan departed. The liberal church no longer refers to Satan and perhaps with good reason. A focus on Satan can lead to fear and or even witch hunts in the extreme. Saint Augustine taught that ‘We are all human; let us hate, not one another, but errors and lies!’ Jesus taught that we should fear no evil because he is with us always. Mark teaches that evil exists. It is the force that keeps us apart from God and one another. It is a force not to be feared.

However, without our acknowledgement, God continues to be blamed for situations that don’t belong to him. It is Satan that keeps us from taking risks for God. It is Satan that spreads fear. It is Satan that keeps us confined to the safety of our neighborhoods never giving God a chance to protect us in the safety of his care. We need to be careful when we search for absolute truth in the newspaper. We need to be careful when we put all of our attention on politics rather than our faith. God gave Jesus the right to sit on his right hand to rule this world. We need not be afraid. We need not numb ourselves from the realities that surround us. He is an inclusive God. He is unstoppable in his search to find us – each and every one.

My friend and colleague, in youth ministry, Rody Nakkamura, told a story during worship on our trip to Open Arms in Baja a few weeks ago. He said that there was a man who wanted to know God so he asked a man of faith a few questions. He said to the man, can you see God? The man said ‘no I can’t see God.’ He then asked the man of faith, ‘can you hear God?’ ‘No’, the man said, I can’t hear God.’ Can you taste God?, the man asked. No, the man said, ‘I can’t taste God.’ Then how do you know that it is God? Because I can feel God, the man of faith replied. We have a brother in faith with us today from Uganda whose name is Daniel. We invited Daniel to sing with us last night as we practiced some songs to sing today. After our choir practice, Daniel showed us a video of some songs that he had recorded in Uganda. In the video, he sang of God’s ever-lasting love to children in an orphanage that cared for 700 children whose parents have died from A.I.D.s. Does Christ care about those children? Of course, he does. He has worked on Daniel’s heart to minister to those children. Daniel is currently studying radio broad-casting at the University of California at Irvine so that he can broadcast God’s message of love and hope to many more people throughout Uganda and beyond. Our prayers are with you, Brother Daniel. He has offered to teach us one of his songs that we will sing to the homeless at the Los Angeles Mission on January 9th.

In our last Christmas story of the season, we hear from Mary in the Gospel of Luke. While she is engaged to Joseph in a town called Galilee, she is visited by the angel Gabriel who was sent by God. Gabriel says to Mary, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” She is perplexed, but the angel tells her to not be afraid for she has found favor with God and she is going to bear a son that will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. Mary wants to know how this can be because she is still a virgin. Gabriel tells her that the Holy Spirit will come upon her, and the power of the Most High will

overshadow her. Therefore, the child that is to be born will be holy; he will be called the Son of God. At this point, Mary says these words. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." At that point the angel departed. The early church believed that with these words Mary reversed the curse of Eve. Where Eve had been disobedient, Mary surrendered herself completely in obedience to the Lord. And in this faithful act, the whole world received a newborn King. An inclusive King whose Kingdom knows no end. It is a different kind of Kingdom - one that speaks to the heart of all who are willing.