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December 1, 2024
Isaiah 40:1-10 & Luke 1:26-33
From the Manger: Hungering for Hope

The prophet Isaiah tells us that a voice cries out ...a voice of comfort, a voice of preparation, a voice reminding us that the Lord God comes with might, with a herald of good news that the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. Hear now these words from the Gospel of Luke:

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And the angel came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But Mary was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

What are you hungering for this Advent season? Maybe not physically hungering for, after too much Thanksgiving turkey and mashed potatoes and pies. Maybe you are emotionally hungering for connection and community and gentleness? Or some time to rest and recharge in a world where busyness is worn as a badge of honor. Or are you spiritually hungering this Advent season? Hungering for wisdom to navigate difficult relationships or a glimmer of light in the cold and dark December. Maybe you are feeling a bit like Mary this year, perplexed and confused. Or some deeper and more complicated emotions.

In the season of Advent this year, we are focusing on the story of Jesus' birth as told from the Gospel of Luke - from the manger. This detail of Jesus' birth – the manger - is unique to Luke's gospel. It provides us with a birth narrative that is a bit gritty, and yet also steeped in glory. It is a narrative that paints us a picture of the world into which Jesus was born, prepares us for his ministry - a ministry of reversal where the first will be last and the last will be first - and plants the seeds of his death and resurrection.

And while it is easy to rhapsodize and idealize and even romanticize the story of angels and shepherds and the innkeeper and his wife with the naturally curly hair and Linus' soliloquy: "for behold, I bring unto you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the City of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord", the story we hear in Luke is set in a definite time and place, in a world which was hungering for hope and peace, hungering for joy and love. A world seeking answers for incredible injustices, for

economic disparities, for hierarchies both codified and unspoken that kept people apart rather than building community. It is into this world that Jesus was born.

AME Pastor the Rev. Dr. Jason D. Thompson says it this way: “The dissonance between the idealized nativity scenes and the harsh realities of the world into which Jesus was born is striking. Jesus entered a reality much like that of the millions in the Middle East today, particularly in places like Palestine, Israel and Lebanon — a world of political unrest, economic hardship and social injustice. These areas, scarred by generations of conflict and displacement, mirror the turmoil of the first Christmas. The Holy Family were themselves refugees as they fled Herod’s violence, a stark reminder of the plight of countless individuals in the region who are displaced by war and occupation.”

What I deeply appreciate about Thompson’s commentary is his recognition that “This messiness is not incidental to the Christmas story; it is integral to the gospel message itself. ... The incarnation — God taking on human flesh — is a radical act of solidarity with the marginalized and oppressed. It is a profound demonstration of kenosis, the self-emptying love of God...”¹

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Mary lived in Nazareth in the Galilee region of Israel. Galilee was in the north, removed from the centers of power and religion in Judah to the south. To the people of Judah – those living near the center of gravity Jerusalem – if they were being generous, Galilee was fly-over territory. If they were being honest, they would share that they looked down on the people of this region “as lesser Jews” since they didn’t regularly worship in the Temple, and many had intermarried with non-Jewish settlers in the region.

The Galilee region was notoriously unstable – protests and uprisings were frequent. Economic instability was rampant, so petty theft and even violent banditry was not uncommon. To say the population was disenfranchised is putting it mildly. As theologian and author Kelly Nikondeha puts it: “Village life across Galilee was not bucolic and benign, but tense and taut. A toxic mingling of woe, want, and waiting for the next act of aggression created cycles of inescapable trauma for all of the inhabitants of Galilee. It was the last place anyone expected to be on God’s map for a peace campaign.”²

¹Jason D. Thompson. The messy hope of Christmas. *Faith and Leadership*. Duke Divinity School. Online at <https://faithandleadership.com/the-messy-hope-christmas>

² Kelly Nikondeha. *The First Advent in Palestine. Reversals, Resistance and the Ongoing Complexity of Hope*. Broadleaf Books; 2022 p41.

If being from Galilee was not off-putting enough, Mary was a young woman in a culture where young women were commodities, property of fathers and husbands. Their voice was not welcomed at the table – even if they found themselves fortunate enough to have a seat at the table at all.

And the angel came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But Mary was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.

What was Mary hungering for? What were the people of Galilee hungering for? They were often hungering for hope for literal “bread” as they sought to feed themselves in a world where the rich wined and dined had plenty, and the poor made do the leftovers. As we will consider throughout Advent, it is both a beautiful irony and a beautiful fulfillment that Jesus is born in Bethlehem – which in Hebrew translates to “house of bread,” for Mary and the people of Galilee were hungering for hope through bread to sustain them.

And yet they were also hungering for more. They were hungering for liberation from the oppressive Roman rule. For hope that they one day would be in control of their own destiny, rather than pawns in the chess battles of the Ancient Near East. So the news that the angel Gabriel brought to Mary must have given Mary pause for hope, for the angel said of this son Jesus:

He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

And of his kingdom there will be no end. In a world where women, especially young women, had little to no agency or voice, Mary would later sing out a song of praise for the gift of this son Jesus and the hope he brings to the world. On her visit to her cousin Elizabeth, she recognizes the hope in her own role reversal and she rejoices that God has looked with favor on her lowly state of a servant, for “surely from now on all generations will call me blessed.” She recognizes the hope in her son Jesus is the hope for all the people hungering for justice and peace in the world; hope for all of those who felt cast aside and who felt that their personhood mattered little. Mary sings that through Jesus, God has shown strength, scattered the proud, 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 come to the aid of his child Israel with mercy.”³

For the people of Galilee hungering for a better world, through Jesus there is prophetic judgement on the rich and the powerful. It is more than compassion for the proverbial widow

³ Luke 1:46-55

and orphan. Jesus is bringing hope of radical transformation through his very body – the incarnation – God made flesh. Jesus, the one anointed to proclaim the good news of God’s forgiving love, reaches out to welcome all and challenges the religious and social structures of his time. For the people hungering for hope, Immanuel – God with us – is more than “a quaint tale of a baby in a manger.” God enters our suffering and penetrates deep within us as Kelly Nikondeha says, “God enters our frail bodies, our hemorrhaging landscapes, and our troubled times. *God is with us* where trauma hits hardest. That God will rise, scars still etched in skin, should not surprise us, given God’s first advent in a land replete with injustice and pain.”⁴

That first Advent in Palestine was full of people hungering for hope. Some may have thought that this hope would be a miraculous rescue from the forces of injustice – a warrior or a political leader or even a religious hero leading a revolt in the image of the Maccabees, a Jewish priestly family who fought against the Greeks in the second century BCE.

Instead the hope came in baby, born in a feeding trough in the city called “House of Bread.” This baby grew into a man whose words called those who hungered for hope to participate in the active work of building a more just world. All of us who hunger for hope are called to this work. All of us who hunger for this hope of the new creation are invited to the table of grace to be fed the bread of life so that we might feed others. All of us who hunger for the hope of the saving grace of our risen savior are invited to the table of love to drink from the cup of salvation. And all of us who hunger for hope are sent out into the world to resist the forces of oppression and evil and to engage in the work of redemption and reconciliation.

Whatever you are hungering for this Advent season, may you be fed by the hope that has sustained people through the ages – the love that transcends all boundaries, the Word made flesh, Immanuel – God with us. Amen.

⁴ Kelly Nikondeha. *The First Advent in Palestine. Reversals, Resistance and the Ongoing Complexity of Hope.* Broadleaf Books; 2022 p31-32.