

Hope In A Time of No Hope, Luke 2:1-20 & Mat 1:18-2:12, 12/24/18, NM

Beginning

The two readings we just heard are the heart of the Christmas Story that we all know and love so much. Here we find an account of the Virgin Birth from Joseph's point of view and the explanation for his loyalty to Mary even after he'd discovered she was pregnant before they'd had conjugal relations. Also in Matthew is the account of the arrival of the Wise Men from the East - who went first to the court of King Herod, asking him where they might find the child who was born King of the Jews?

And likewise we heard the consequences of their inquiry. It was innocent enough from their point of view. By all accounts they were astrologers who had seen a sign in the night sky indicating that a prophecy was about to be fulfilled. It never occurred to them as they rode away from Herod that he was threatened by the existence of such a child. So threatened that he plotted the child's death. While the Wise Men were giving gifts the Holy Child, Herod - being unable to find and follow them - sent his minions to murder every boy child in Bethlehem under the age of two. This is one of the infrequently told Christmas stories. The Gospels do not tell us how many children were murdered in that little operation, but one imagines it was hundreds at least.

Luke's version of the Christmas Story is particularly moving. It's shorter than Matthew's, but it contains some of the most important elements of the story, including the Roman census that drove the Holy Family to be traveling in winter time and the manger they were forced to use as a delivery room and living quarters, because all the hotels were filled. As it turned out that manger was super important because it allowed poor people and farm animals to come close to Jesus and express their wonder and gratitude.

The lines in Luke where the shepherds were addressed by angels and the Heavenly Host, is probably the most often recited scripture reading of all time,

and rightly so, for it is very moving and very convincing. Somehow when we hear it we suspend our skepticism and something inside us just responds.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

Middle

I believe we need the Christmas Story. We always have and we always will, because it articulates something fundamental about what it means to be a human being. And that is a need to believe that there is something out there greater than ourselves that is in charge. And more, that this *something* cares about us. Cares about us collectively - but also cares about each of us individually.

The whole spiritual enterprise is about getting in touch with this something - getting on board with it, and becoming a conscious contributor to the project.

Certainly it's possible to live without a spiritual awareness. Millions of people walking around caring for nothing that is not part of they themselves attest to that. But I would argue that they are only half living. And whether they mean to or not, they do a lot of damage to the world and to the rest of us.

I'm reminded of the OT stories of times when God lost the love of humanity and sought to scourge the world of us. One such moment came during the life of Noah. God grew disgusted with us and decided that enough was enough. Humanity had to go! Only thing - God liked Noah. And because God liked Noah God decided to let Noah and his family live. And since God was letting Noah live, it made sense to let the other creatures live too. Noah and his offspring were going to have to eat something!

Gen 6:5-22 The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, "I will blot out from the

earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them." But Noah found favor in the sight of the LORD. And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth. Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. Also take with you every kind of food that is eaten, and store it up; and it shall serve as food for you and for them." Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him.

Noah and his Ark did manage to get through the Great Flood and afterward God made a covenant with Noah never again to try and wipe out everyone at the same time! In a sense that covenant led to Christ, because being once again confronted with human wickedness, God had to find another way to get our attention - hence The Messiah. And the sacrifice of The Messiah.

The OT community had been waiting for Messiah to arrive for a thousand years and more when Jesus showed up. Israel had been through years upon years of internal conflicts that led to the division of the nation into Northern and Southern Kingdoms. Then came the Babylonian Conquest and with it the kidnapping of Israel's King and leadership - followed by the conquest of Babylon by Persia and the subsequent Return of the detainees and the conflicts that followed. As might be expected, the gift of return was not a gift to those who had remained in Palestine. To them the returnees were simply interlopers.

Then came Rome. Israel was a tiny country compared to some of Rome's other conquests. And yet long after it had been conquered, Israel was still fighting. The Romans couldn't understand it. Every other country they occupied gave in to the inevitable. But Israel kept fighting even when there was no possible chance of winning. The ultimate expression of that was Masada. Does everyone know about Masada? It's a fortress in Israel that was built on a plateau on top of a mountain in 37 BCE. During the First Jewish Roman War after the destruction of The Temple in Jerusalem, about a thousand Zealot fighters along with their families overcame the Roman garrison at Masada and took refuge there. The Romans tried to take it back, and this is what happened...

In 73 CE, the Roman governor of Iudaea, [Lucius Flavius Silva](#), headed the [Roman legion X Fretensis](#) and laid siege to Masada.^[4] The Roman legion surrounded Masada, built a [circumvallation](#) wall and then a siege ramp against the western face of the plateau.^[4] According to Dan Gill,^[10] geological investigations in the early 1990s confirmed earlier observations that the 114 m (375 ft) high assault ramp consisted mostly of a natural spur of bedrock. The ramp was complete in the spring of 73, after probably two to three months of siege, allowing the Romans to finally breach the wall of the fortress with a [battering ram](#) on April 16.^{[11][12]} The Romans employed the X Legion and a number of auxiliary units and Jewish prisoners of war, totaling some 15,000 (of whom an estimated 8,000 to 9,000 were fighting men),^[13] in crushing Jewish resistance at Masada. A giant [siege tower](#) with a battering ram was constructed and moved laboriously up the completed ramp. According to Josephus, when Roman troops entered the fortress, they discovered that its defendants had set all the buildings but the food storerooms ablaze and committed mass suicide or killed each other, 960 men, women, and children in total. Josephus wrote of two stirring speeches that the Sicari leader had made to convince his men to kill themselves.^[4] Only two women and five children were found alive.

There are those who say that what happened at Masada was a tragedy. That the people who fought there died for no reason. The Romans insisted that they would have let the people go. I do not agree. Masada was a triumph of Hope. A triumph of Heart. A triumph of Belief. For they showed themselves and The World what it means to live faithfully to the end. To accept the consequences of one's principles no matter what. Of course the Romans did not understand for they were conquerors. The kind of faith that Jesus preached would never have made sense to them. That's why Pontius Pilate got so frustrated when Jesus wouldn't speak on his own behalf. Well...what was there to say? He'd already spoken his truth and so he was at peace. And, you know, it was exactly the kind of faith that drove the people who died at Masada, as well. The faith that is Hope beyond all other Hopes.

The end of the Roman Jewish Wars brought The Diaspora. All the Jews were driven out of Palestine and became wanderers. That's how the Jews wound up in Europe and finally became the victims of The Nazis. But here is the thing I want to tell you. They never lost Hope. Nor did they give up their identity or their religion. These people who had been rescued from slavery, forged into a nation, made into a priesthood, rescued from disaster again and again - who were conspired against and despised nearly every place they went - they not only held

fast to hope - they have shared their hope with the rest of us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth!

End

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

This moment we find ourselves in is a hard one. Maybe the hardest place humanity has ever known. Some of the problems we face have no clear solution. And yet, I do not feel inclined to give up. I believe that God is watching and waiting and doing. And I know that God would not put us here with no way out. We just have to find it. So I am hopeful. Infinitely hopeful. There are no prophecies that speak to this moment that tell us what will happen. There are prophecies that tell us we will be judged on our performance. Prophecies that tell us how we got here and what it is that God dislikes about where we have come. But the outcome is for us to write and for us to do. There's no time to be afraid. No time to be tired. No time to be worried or fretful - no time for hatred or division or suspicion. There's time to do. Time to be. Time to live. Time to think of solutions. Time to spend with loved ones. Time to teach one another.

Whatever it is that you do or want to do that's positive and healthy and spiritual or fun...do that. And for God's sake tell someone else about it! Don't keep it inside. Share yourself with another person. Damn, share with a lot of people.

When Jesus was doing his ministry he was like a soapbox orator. He'd arrive in a town somewhere in Galilee and he'd go to the local synagogue and speak. Whatever was in his heart. Sometimes there was no synagogue, so he'd go down to the beach and take a rowboat and go out a little way and stand up and that would be his pulpit. And he would talk to the people just like that. From the boat. And you know they listened oh man did they listen to what he had to say

because no one had ever heard anything like that. So much Hope and so much faith in a few simple sentences. So damn simple it's ridiculous.

We're still repeating his words now and you know brothers and sisters, we can be that inspired. Of course we can. We have to believe in ourselves. We have to have Hope in God's Plan for us. And in the end even if it all comes crashing down around us it doesn't matter. Because we tried. We tried. We loved each other and we said so. And when we wake up in The Kingdom we will know that it was good.

You are all thinking people, I know that and I know that you see what's going on around us. They want us to give up you know? Satan and his minions. They want to see it all go up in flames. But we're not going to let them. We're warriors of the spirit and we believe in Christ. We follow Jesus and we go where he awaits us. Don't get downcast. Don't lose heart. Hope in the time of No Hope is the Greatest Hope that can ever be Hoped! It is a pure thing made of the tears of an infinite number of children. It can never be adulterated or diluted.

Do not fear The Adversary. He fears you! He fears the smallest and weakest among you because he sees the purity of the human heart. He cannot stand if we don't let him.

On Christmas morning when a thousand million children wake up and see that tree and all the presents they will project a joy that is overwhelming and will always be stronger than despair. So be together this Christmas. Be together and be strong, be wise, be just, be hopeful. You don't have to be perfect. You just have to sincerely care about the person next to you.

And all God's People did say...