

The Sunday Missive – December 24, 2023 The Fourth Sunday in Advent

Hymn 66 Come thou long expected Jesus

Come, thou long-expected Jesus born to set thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee.

Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art:
Dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.

Born thy people to deliver, born a child, and yet a king,
Born to reign in us for ever, now thy gracious kingdom bring.

By thine own eternal Spirit rule in all our hearts alone;
By thine all-sufficient merit, raise us to thy glorious throne.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5lwtbnU-1Tw>

Hymn 56 O Come, O come Emmanuel

O come, O come, Immanuel, and ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

O come, O King of nations, bind in one the hearts of all mankind.
Bid all our sad divisions cease and be yourself our King of Peace.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOBcuHaKQiU>

The Collect of the Day

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your
Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for
himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

When the king was settled in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan, "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent." Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you."

But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders, whom I commanded to shepherd my people, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the Lord of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. Your house and your people shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

Psalm 89

Your love, O Lord, forever will I sing* ***From age to age I will proclaim your faithfulness.***

I am persuaded that your love is established forever* ***Your faithfulness is set firmly in the heavens.***

I have made a covenant with my chosen one* ***I have sworn an oath to David my servant***

I will establish your line forever* ***And preserve your throne for all generations.***

You said to your faithful people: I have set the crown upon him* ***I have exalted one chosen from the people.***

I have found David my servant* ***With oil have I anointed him.***

My hand will hold him fast* ***His generosity will know no bounds.***

No enemy shall deceive him* ***Nor shall the wicked bring him down.***

I will scatter his foes before him* ***And strike down the hateful ones.***

My faithfulness and love shall prevail* ***He shall bring peace to all the peoples.***

He will say to me, You are my God* ***You are the rock of my salvation.***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hEXH10tDQm4>

Romans 16:25-27

Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith-- to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen.

Luke 1:26-38

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 he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she 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.” Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore, the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

Just Say Yes Advent 4B

Last week we looked at the life of Mary the Mother of Jesus, the Madonna, the Virgin, the BVM. Where we stand on the continuum of thinking regarding the physical, biological, historically literal veracity of Luke’s account of the birth and parentage of Jesus doesn’t matter one whit. Whatever our view of Luke’s Nativity narrative: absolute sacred fact, beautiful sacred myth, or sweetly apocryphal fiction, it makes no difference. She listened to the best of her ability to the will of God, she tried her hardest to determine what the best use of her life would be, and she gave everything she had to act accordingly.

Mary set out and went to a town in the hill country to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who was also pregnant. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. In other words, her baby gave her one heckuva a big kick. But instead of crying out “Holy Smokes, this one wants out,” Elizabeth exclaimed, “Mary, my cuz, blessed be the fruit of your womb; as soon as I heard your voice, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And Mary decided to spill the whole story to Cousin Liz. She said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, Liz, all I want to do is please God. I’m pregnant, and it looks like Joe is gonna stick with me, even though... whatever. My spirit rejoices in God my Savior, instead of driving me into shame in the wilderness or ostracism and misery, God

has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant: me. The Mighty One has done such a great thing for me, all I can think of is how holy is God's name.

At this point, Elizabeth probably said, "You'd better sit down, cuz, I know I gotta sit down myself. Look over there behind the bread basket and see if old Zach left us any cool wine. This was before we knew that wine during pregnancy was ill-advised. So they sat down with a little something, and Mary continued:

"And if God does something like this for me, then his mercy is real. It's always been here and always will be. It's going to last for generations – in fact, forever! He has shown strength; he has scattered the proud, brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry, and sent the rich away empty. God is working, Liz, and I can't possibly think of anything to do but make myself available!" Maybe Elizabeth pointed out that this utopian vision had not actually come to pass for most of humanity, or maybe she just encouraged her cousin to hold onto the kind of wide-eyed, big smiled faith and hope that were making her so happy. Nobody knows.

Abbot Andrew Marr has written about how attitude and outlook can determine the very quality of our lives: God does not wait for us to be perfect or anything close to perfect before granting us unconditional love. The word for repentance – *metanoia* – in the New Testament does not mean an end to sin so much as a turning of the mind in a new direction. To base our lives on God's unconditional love amounts to just such a radical turnaround for most of us. Most of us live by assessment, accusation, blame and comparison. Our lives tend to be energized by the quest for equalling, chronicling, imitating, surpassing, overcoming or avenging the actions of others: Unconditional love may be all well and good for Jesus, but we have lots of good reasons to withhold some measure of love from just about everyone we know. But the hope of forgiveness offers us both the ability and the endurance to face our habitual dependence on accusation and comparison and set these habits aside – one habit at a time, one day at a time.

As we talked about last week, we need neither to prove Mary nor Elizabeth to have experienced a physical miracle (their pregnancies) in

order for their experiences to be miraculous to us. Their miracles are just the same as ours can be. Indeed, every birth seems to be as miraculous as it is excruciating. We'll have one in the family this week and another in June, praise God. Yes it's unlikely that our lives will take a course like that of John the Baptist, let alone Jesus the Christ. But what we can do is say yes to the revolution of repentance that Advent depicts and demands. We can latch onto hope as if our very lives depended on it – which they do.

Both Elizabeth and Mary might have taken the opposite attitude -- deciding they were too old to be parents, or too unwed -- and been desolate, horrified, embittered, desperate, doomed. But instead the two of them -- three if we count the baby who leaps in Eliza's womb at the nearness of the unborn Jesus -- become the first disciples, the first to say yes to Emmanuel – even before Jesus is born, the first to know that God's self is among us and with us and in us.

Mary's is a visionary song: in it, there is already a new heaven and a new earth, a new Jerusalem according to her words, narrated in the perfect tense: God has scattered the proud, God has lifted up the lowly, God has sent the rich empty away. God has not merely done these things once and for all, but has permanently established the possibility and eventuality of justice when, as with the grammatical construction of Mary's words, all will be perfect. As T. S. Eliot wrote in Four Quartets "The end is where we start from...or say that the end precedes the beginning." Thus, God in Christ embodies a real and living version of the hope that has always been. Mary's vision is based on that hope which is given human birth in her willingness to say yes to God despite her circumstances.

From now on, she will be called blessed, not just because she gave birth to Jesus of Nazareth, but also because she bears god in a way that everyone can – she comes to think of the world in a completely new way, just as each of us can, the way of which Jesus will preach and set his example. As the great artist Martha Graham has expressed it, we must "Stay Open. There is vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique.... You have to keep open and aware directly to the urges that motivate you. Keep the channel open."

The great novelist Wallace Stegner writes about the desire and the effort to observe life as closely as possible, so that our stories – histories, herstories – will be as immediate and relevant as possible. “There is a physical law that teases me: the Doppler Effect. The sound of anything coming at you -- a train, say, or the future -- has a higher pitch than the sound of the same thing going away. I have neither perfect pitch nor a head for mathematics, and anyway who wants to compute the speed of history? Like all falling bodies, it constantly accelerates. But I would like to hear your life as you heard it, coming at you, instead of hearing it as I do, a sober sound of expectations reduced, desires blunted, hopes deferred or abandoned, chances lost, defeats accepted, griefs borne. I would like to hear it as it sounded while it was passing.”

We can hear in Stegner’s fancy an admonition to do as Mary did: to embrace the truth and joy of life’s continuity, our human connectedness, the paradox of our singularity and ephemerality. Each of us is at once a timeless soul and a shooting star. Our stories consist of the choices we make. Mary’s vision of hope enables her to choose to say yes to God, in other words to say no to everything ungodly, like her fears, her previous experience, her position in society. Each of us has the possibility, the invitation, the reproductive opportunity to bear hope in our hearts too, and to give birth to Christ’s love in our lives, if only we will, like Mary and Elizabeth, meet our friends with joy and affirmation when they tell us about saying no to the ungodly and yes to love. Then the courage will come. *Ku bügg lém – ñemel yambb*, say the Wolof -- If you like honey, brave the bees. Ours may not be children born to be queens or kings, but our transformation will indeed be miraculous – on that very day, and on every day we choose to live by this hope. What a thing to ask for Christmas.

Hymn 437 Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!
Unnumbered blessings give my spirit voice;
Tender to me the promise of his word;
In God my Savior shall my heart rejoice.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his Name!
Make known his might, the deeds his arm has done;
His mercy sure, from age to age the same;
His holy Name— the Lord, the Mighty One.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might!
Powers and dominions lay their glory by.
Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,
The hungry fed, the humble lifted high.

Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word!
Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord
To children's children and for evermore!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6ji4y9Q-K0>

If You Have Nothing

The gesture of a gift is adequate.
If you have nothing: laurel leaf or bay,
no flower, no seed, no apple gathered late,
do not in desperation lay
the beauty of your tears upon the clay.

No gift is proper to a Deity;
no fruit is worthy for such power to bless.
If you have nothing, gather back your sigh,
and with your hands held high, your heart held high,
lift up your emptiness!

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