

LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS
ISAIAH 7:10-16; MATTHEW 1:18-25
DECEMBER 23, 2001 – ADVENT FOUR
THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Just in case some of us were getting a little too giddy this time of year *The New Yorker* sprinkled its last issue with a nice selection of “cartoons noir.” You know, black humor. The poor guy on the barstool. The lonely curmudgeon at the end of his long dinner table.

Or, like the cartoon to which I am referring – the ill-fated new employee.

There he sits on the receiving end of the huge desk of the v.p. for personnel.

With a glower that would make Genghis Kahn shiver the personnel manager says to his innocent new hire, “The only way you will be able to function here is if you think of yourself as having already been fired.”

I wonder if the editors of *The New Yorker* do it intentionally. Give us a little black humor at what is supposed to be a happy time of season because they know that no matter what the season tragedy and heartbreak and darkness continue.

Just because Elmwood Avenue is lined with white lights and Macy’s is having a sale before Christmas does not make us impervious to bad things happening.

Two families of this congregation have members who are, as we speak, gravely ill. Janie Cole’s death yesterday leaves all of us a keen sense of loss. When the rest of the world is singing carols a little dark humor in *The New Yorker* helps to soften the blow for those of us who are moving through some difficult period or adjusting to some hard news.

There is a theological school that describes what *The New Yorker* is up to. It’s called the Absence of God. Contemporary versions of it are Harold Kushner’s, When Bad Things Happen to Good People or Elie Wiesel’s reflections on the Holocaust.

After September 11 if we did not know anything about Absence of God theology we do now. It’s not something you readily embrace. But it’s there – even for those who live in the most affluent nation during the most affluent period of history.

What I find myself pondering this Sunday and what I would like to raise for us today is this: what difference does the Christmas message make to a world that has more than its share of Absence of God stories to tell?

The obvious thing the Christmas message has to say is that God is not absent, God is present. Today is not Christmas. But both Bible stories point to the presence of God.

Isaiah gives Ahaz, when Ahaz trusts his army to save him, bad news and good news. Isaiah says to the king “you think Syria and Israel are tough enemies, wait till Persia comes calling! That’s the bad news. The good news he tells the king is not to expect a bigger defense budget, but of all things that a young woman shall conceive a child and he shall be called Emmanuel, God with us.

Fast forward. Matthew portrays the birth of Jesus as an astounding surprise to poor Joseph as he bolts up in bed in the middle of the night.

The angel reassures Joseph, telling him that this strange birth, this unexpected baby, is the supreme sign that “God is with us.”

If we live in a world that experiences God as absent we also live in a world, says the Bible that experiences God as present. To suffering, exiled Israel, the prophets promised abundance. At Christmas we see valleys lifted up and mountains brought low, a highway made through the desert straight from God to us. Water in dry places.

Last Thursday a young single mother, hard working, barely making ends meet, but making her way nonetheless, stopped from the rush of the season, heaved a sigh of relief, reassured me she was fine but that some days were just plain hard. Then Friday came a call from a member of the congregation. He said he missed the angel tree this year, that he and his family had a lot to be thankful for. "I know this sounds a little crazy," he said, "but you don't happen to know a young, hard-working single mom we could help out this year do you?"

Valleys lifted up. Highways straight from God. Water in dry places.

Frankly, until that phone call I was still somewhere way back in Advent. But since Friday I've been sitting up, paying more attention. Jesus is almost here. He is coming.

He is on the way. He may even be knocking at the door now if we listen carefully.

We do get a little casual about it don't we. Not about decorating our homes and laying in Christmas supplies. I mean we get casual about Jesus coming. But not those early Christians. They associated judgement with Jesus' arrival. That's why a few weeks ago we heard John the Baptist calling for repentance and change.

The connection is this: if Jesus were to appear right now would you and I find ourselves prepared? Would our hearts be a suitable dwelling place for God? Carol and I just had some new living room furniture delivered.

Before it came she advised me the room had to be prepared, molding painted, floors cleaned. I don't know about you but I have a little interior painting and cleaning to do before Jesus comes to stay in my heart.

Very few people these days tremble at the thought of Jesus entering our world. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "we have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and God's coming at Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver of fear God's coming should arouse in us. We are indifferent to the message, taking only what is pleasant and agreeable from it forgetting...that this is the God of the cosmos who draws near to the people of our little planet and lays claim to you and me. The coming of God is truly not only glad tidings, but first of all frightening news for everyone who has a conscience."ⁱ

This is where I part company with shopping malls and city boutiques that medicate patrons with Christmas muzak from the week before Thanksgiving. It's like using ibuprofen for cardiac arrest. If Absence of God thinking goes too far in the direction of gloom and doom, Presence of God theology errs on the side of God's magic wand taking away my pain to make me comfortable and happy.

One preacher cautions: the path is uncomfortably short between the Christmas message of *God with us* and the cozier presumption that God, like the toy store, "R" Us. The danger of ignoring that inner twinge of fear and the question, "what would I do if God showed up right here, right now?" is that we, rather than God, become the center of attention. Our agenda rather than God's agenda for the poor prevails. God with us is not a symbol that means anything we want. It has a name and place and face.ⁱⁱ

So back to my original question: what difference does the Christmas message make to a world and to those of us who have more than our share of Absence of God experiences?

On the one hand the Christmas message of God with us keeps us from the grip of gloom and doom. Yet, it does not give us permission – even for a moment – to forget the world’s pain and wallow in our own holiday frenzy.

So what difference does it make? The message of Christmas which is incarnation, which is God with us, which is God come in human flesh, is a challenge to each of us to live enfleshed faith. God came in Jesus and continues to come, visible in Christian lives. Christians are those who not only believe that God was in Jesus reconciling the world to himself, but also those called to embody the phrase, “God with us” in our actions.

Yet, in order to live God-with-us-lives we have to trust that God is indeed with us – even when we don’t see it or feel it or believe it to be true. We have to let the Christmas message speak to and overcome our fear of change and resistance to new life.

Let me tell you a true story. Maybe you’ve heard it before. One weekend in Atlantic City, a woman won a bucket full of quarters. She decided to stash the bucket of coins in her room before dinner with her husband. About to step into the elevator she noticed the two large men already on board. Both African-American. The woman froze. Her first thought was: “These men will rob me.” Her second thought was: “You bigot. They look like perfect gentlemen.”

But stereotypes are powerful and fear immobilized her. She hoped they could not read her mind, but she knew they most surely could – and did. Through a mighty effort of will she stepped into the elevator. The doors closed, but the elevator did not move. “It’s a trap,” she thought, “It’s all over.” Perspiration began to drip down her back.

“Hit the floor,” said one of the men. “Do whatever they tell you,” her instincts told her. She dropped the bucket. Quarters flew everywhere. She collapsed on the elevator carpet. For several brief, eternal minutes, there was not a sound in the elevator. Finally, one of the men said, very politely, “Ma’am if you’ll just tell us what floor you want, we’ll push the button.”

The one who had spoken had trouble speaking. Clearly he was holding back a belly laugh. “I knew it was a plan,” she thought. The perspiration poured. The two reached down. Helped her to her feet. Gathered up all the quarters. “When I told my friend to hit the floor, he said, I just meant he should hit the elevator button.”

He spoke gently and genially. He bit his lip. “My God,” she thought, “what a spectacle I have made of myself. How do you apologize to perfectly responsible, respectable gentlemen for acting as if they were going to rob you?”

When they got to her floor, she seemed a little unsteady on her feet. They escorted her to her door and bid her good evening. She could hear them laughing down the hall.

The next morning a dozen roses were delivered to her room. Attached to each rose was a crisp new one hundred dollar bill. The card said, “Thanks for the best laugh we’ve had in years.” Signed, Eddie Murphy and Michael Jordan.ⁱⁱⁱ

Sometimes fear immobilizes us, blinds us, causes us to see things that aren't even there.

The Christmas message God with us becomes a powerful force in our lives when – released from gloom and doom despair – we turn not inward like Ahaz or that woman but outward like Joseph. When we relax and realize the bucket of quarters to which we cling is small potatoes compared with the bouquet of blessings God has in store for each one of us.

When I first read Isaiah's prophecy this week I found it peculiar that he tells Ahaz the way out of his foreign policy crisis is not a bigger army but a child named Emmanuel. Then it dawned on me. Isaiah is telling Ahaz and you and me that God is calling us not just to build our personal lives around this child...but to build our public and collective life around him.

An interesting book and proposal came out two years ago at the time of all the millennium mania. It details with biblical precision how the apocalyptic view of the year 2000 – that God was going to use the turn of the millennia to devastate creation and establish his own harsh monarchy – is utter nonsense.

But then the author goes on to urge that Christians around the world, particularly wealthy Christians in western Europe and North America use the millennium in some radical expression of justice that would honor Jesus. He suggests, for example, that we begin a movement to cancel the entire debt of the poorest nations of the world.^{iv}

That proposal no doubt infuriates some people, for good and bad reasons. I'm no economist. So I am not going to pronounce whether or not it is a good idea, but it is a great dream, isn't it? He does put an intriguing idea on the table. If not his proposal, then by what other joyful, radical, bold, confident move shall we – Christians in general – and we Westminster friends, celebrate the glorious good news that God is with us?

That's the difference the Christmas message makes in my book. If we ponder that question and remember that in Jesus Christ God did not stand aloof from the tragedy of the world but made it his own, then I am confident the Holy Spirit will enable us in all sorts of ways to reveal the truth that God is with us in acts of charity and sacrifice.

If we are to love as we have been loved then being extravagantly involved ourselves is the only way.

So I proclaim to you this day glad tidings, "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God with us." Amen.

ⁱ D. Bonhoeffer, Watch for the Light (New York: Plough Press, 2001) December 20th.

ⁱⁱ William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, October through December 2001, 49.

ⁱⁱⁱ David McFarlane, sermon preached at The Presbyterian Church, Sewickley, PA, December 26, 1999.

^{iv} N.T. Wright, The Millennium Myth: Hope for a Postmodern World, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1999).