

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Lectionary C, Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)

Trinity Church, Dec. 23, 2018

Christmas is almost here. The flowers proclaim a celebration. We will sing carols this evening at the service of Lesson and Carols, and all of a sudden our preparations for Christmas will be completed. Tomorrow we will celebrate the good news of God's coming to us as the Holy Child. Whether prepared or not it is time to greet this child and to celebrate the gift of God's presence with us.

The reflections and thoughts that we bring to this celebration vary. We will remember past occasions – some joyful, others disappointing – and upon those memories we will seek bright new visions.

As with the birth of a child we trust that everything will go well. An oblate friend of mind just celebrated the birth of a new grandson with the joy that everything did go well -- ten fingers and ten toes, good health, and a cute expression.

We know, of course, that everything does not always work out as planned. Some arrivals challenge the heart. And when anticipated joy turns to sorrow, the grief is more

severe, especially at a holiday season. Those things in our lives that are good seem even better, and the disappointments more painful. Christmas puts joy and sorrow in keen perspective. For those enjoying good health, family and friends, the celebration will be merry. For others, sudden illness, a broken relationship, and even death can make these holidays lonely and hollow.

Our heritage shows us that many things do not work out the way they were meant to be. Adam and Eve, for example, were meant to be happy in the Garden of Eden. But in that story they became separated from God because of their disobedience. Things ceased to be the way they were meant to be because of their choices. Think also of God's relationship with the people of Israel. They understood that they were to have a special relationship with God as God's chosen. How is it then that the Jewish community has suffered centuries of persecution and genocide. That's not the way it was meant to be -- perhaps because of other people's choices.

Think also of God's generous love toward us, seeking to show us Love in human terms in Jesus. At Jesus' birth, was there room in the inn? Why did Jesus, Mary, and Joseph have to flee Herod's wrath? With a message of good news,

why was Jesus despised, pierced, crowned with thorns, and nailed to a tree? It's hard to imagine that all those circumstances whether from legend or history were the way it was meant to be.

And yet it is the totality of our experiences that we can bring to a Christmas celebration. God didn't come to us expecting that everything would be the way it was meant to be. God came to us in Jesus precisely because everything is not the way it is meant to be. God's compassion is so intense that by empathizing with us in our struggles and disappointments, God chose to become vulnerable, to live as one us, to experience both the joys and sorrows that we experience, and throughout it all to say, even from a cross, you are loved, you are forgiven, and I will give you new life.

One of the Christmas carols that I particularly like is "In the bleak mid-winter, frosty wind made moan, earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone; snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow, snow on snow, in the bleak midwinter, long ago."

It is the last stanza that is particularly meaningful to me. As I think about Christmases both past and present I wonder what it is that I can give to the Christ Child that is

true and from the depth of my life. Christina Rossetti answers the question so beautiful in this last stanza:

“What can I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb; if I were a wise man, I would do my part; yet what I can I give him...give my heart.”

There are times in our lives when we might shout out, “Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven.” Our hearts are warm and thankful. And then there are times when as another carol expresses, the stones must speak for us, for glory seems to have passed us by, and our only cries are with tears. But as the stars bend their voices, “every stone shall cry, in praises of the Child by whose descent among us the worlds are reconciled.”

Jesus understood the mixture of how our hearts can feel. He knew that Palm Sunday shouts of praise could turn to shouts for crucifixion. He knew that we are capable of praise and stoney hearts. But even when our lives groan and darken, the stars of God’s glory bend to lift us up – to give us new birth – to give us peace – no matter what our hearts may feel.

Keeping the big picture of our lives is not always easy. But it does make a difference if we can accept the humble

condition of our lives and allow God to lift us up. God performed that miracle in the Blessed Virgin Mary who never thought it possible that she would bear the Savior of the world. Perhaps it was precisely because no one would ever suspect that this is “the way it is meant to be” -- that God would set a pattern to do the impossible, over and over again; and to lift us all to become the way we were meant to be.

Christmas is a confirmation that Jesus’ coming among us was not only to heighten the good times with songs of angels but to hear the laments as well. Jesus felt what we feel, even in his darken hour. And yet his message is not an epitaph, but a canticle of new birth.

Whatever Christmas may become for you this year, may it be a time when you offer the gift of your heart, with its joys and sorrows. Let the unexpected happen to you. As we prayed this Advent, “Come, Lord Jesus”. Be open now to the Christ Child and follow where he may lead – perhaps to a new endeavor, generosity, or praise. Perhaps you will come to the Christ Child not with gold, frankincense, and myrrh, but with a broken heart. Let your sorrow and disappointment be your gifts. Then rise, follow the Holy Child through your own “Calvaries” to resurrected living.

Discover the meaning of Jesus' life anew as "the great Integrator – pulling all contradictions, pain, joy, triumph, failure, and those things that make us human, into a greater wholeness." Discover again the Christ – "a beacon, a compass, signaling us to follow Him, to share this greater mission of binding the world together." (Dale Stolz)

May God's blessing be with you at Christmas and throughout the New Year.