

FIELDS AND FLOODS, ROCKS, HILLS, AND PLAINS

The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME

Saturday, November 30, 2019

Scripture: [Isaiah 11:1–10](#)

INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPTURE

Happy Advent to you all!

It's not lost on me that the season of quiet waiting for the great feast and joy of Christmas that was envisioned by the church some thousand years ago bears little resemblance to noise and pace of most of our lives in this season leading up to Christmas. I have started to notice that more and more people really seem to wait for December 26th at this point... they wait for the rest which will come after all the celebrating.

So, I hope in the season to come you get to have some rest here... and that we spend some time listening for the arrival of the Christ in a different way. Maybe in a way that surrounds us, rather than pulling us in so many different directions.

Today we hear from the prophet Isaiah, as we see that not only will Israel be changed by the coming messiah... creation itself will be as well.

SERMON

Birth into Creation

This season has some parallel with the arrival of babies I've noticed, plans are made, anxiety worked out, family dynamics often get put to a test... We hope there is wonder at the height of the story, and then the real work begins... We might say that is entirely appropriate: we follow along with Mary and Joseph.

But I do wonder, if Advent is a season of waiting for the baby Jesus to be born, if we don't keep ourselves harried and hooked into the patterns of our own lives by thinking of this solely as a birth as we have known it. It seems the danger might be to take a Christmas story that invites outside of ourselves, and make it more about ourselves. At an extreme, I think when we focus only on the human reality of Jesus, we focus on his ministry and his salvation as only for *us*... humans, and far too many of us would like to get into smaller subdivisions than that. Of course, that's not what our tradition teaches.

Our tradition does teach us that the messiah has come, as a baby, and in a stable, not a royal chamber. But it also reminds us of his connection and high place in the wide world maybe even more than the human one. It was stars, much more than gold leaf that twinkled above him as he drifted to sleep. It was livestock, not servants who witnessed and attended to him.

For creation itself will be changed... we are shown here in Isaiah: a wolf and a lamb, a leopard and a kid,

All these models of how the world is: how it consumes without thought, making food, (might we say, making wealth?) by gobbling up all around us. Isaiah tells us that when the messiah comes in the fullness of all time: nature will find balance and peace with itself. Humanity will grow where it has hacked itself to pieces and burned itself down, and we will live in the peaceable new creation of mutual care.

Joy to the Earth

This Advent, I am celebrating the 300th Anniversary of Isaac Watt's hymn, "Joy to the World." An adaptation that the famous hymn-writer never intended to be a Christmas carol, but a loose paraphrase of Psalm 98. This hymn is about the coming of the messiah, but the words that Watts chose are filled with the joy of what we call "incarnation." The idea that God has come to dwell with us in Jesus, fully human, and fully divine... both, somehow, in a mystery we can't ever fully understand.

In response, Watts has us sing Joy to the Earth, along with "heaven and nature," and "fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains..."^[1]

It is a verse that is so much larger than just one human form, or indeed, humanity... it invites all creation into the celebration and praise of this incarnation. "The Word become flesh, and dwelt among us."^[2] can suddenly be a bigger "us."

THE FULL INCARNATION

I'm going to be leading a class where we walk through Watts's hymn, and read some of theologian, Richard Rohr's, book *The Universal Christ*. Very early on, Rohr invites us to remember that first chapter of John... that the Logos, the Word, was with God in the beginning and without the Word nothing was made... He reminds us that when we talk about "the Christ", we are dealing with God's connection to creation even before and after Jesus. In it, he says:

When Christians hear the word “incarnation,” most of us think about the birth of Jesus, who personally demonstrated God’s radical unity with humanity. ^[3]

But instead of saying that God came into the world through Jesus, maybe it would be better to say that Jesus came out of an already Christ-soaked world. The second incarnation flowed out of the first, out of God’s loving union with physical creation. ^[4]

That can lead us to a new understanding of what incarnation means.

Spinning

So in the time to come, this Advent, this beginning again, I invite you to view this incarnation as largely as you can... as the reminder that God has come to dwell through Christ in everything that is. And that the invitation to us is to participate in a transformed world that does not consume itself, but sustains itself in partnership with the divine.

Ordinary matter is the hiding place for Spirit, and thus the very Body of God. ^[5]

We know this, here... We see it in this time when it seems the stars themselves are somehow closer and clearer in the darker, crisper, season.

Here, Rohr is referencing, though there is no footnote, the work of the feminist theologian, Dr. Sallie McFague.

Two weeks ago, Sally McFague died. Her book, *The Body of God* stands as a master work in the way in which she asked to view all of creation as a God’s self-expression of love, and embodiment of God’s Spirit. It had implications for what theology had to say about ecology and economics. She knew from her wolf and her lamb.

Christianity is par excellence the religion of the incarnation and, in one sense, is about nothing but embodiment, as is evident in its major doctrines. In another sense... Christianity has denied, subjugated, and at times despised the body, especially female human bodies and bodies in the natural world.

She's not wrong. We have made the incarnation much too small! Just about God's presence in Jesus's body, when Jesus, and Isaiah want to talk to us about all creation transformed. Jesus said he came to bring Good News to the poor, and today, I'm thankful that in 1993 Sallie McFague called nature the "new poor" and invited us to follow Jesus and "think and act differently, to think and act as if bodies matter." Because the incarnation teaches us that they do, for all of them now get to be home to God's spirit and new life... if we can let ourselves... if we consume one another and all creation less... if we can strive for that "peaceable kingdom" which we believe, we must believe, will come.

Today, this Advent, as we do every year, we hope. We hope that God has come to dwell in and with and through us. We look to the stars and their courses, and to the smallest signs of life, so vulnerable, so dependent... and we find all these things the Word of God richly dwelling, inviting us into the dance of wild and wondrous things which proclaim God's love in their unity and harmony. May that living Christ come and dwell within us here. May the simple gifts of earth and life he broke and gave freely to us at this table, sustain us and fill us.

As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. World without end. Amen.

-
1. Watts, Issac. "Joy to the World," 1719. ↩
 2. John 1:14] ↩
 3. Rohr, Richard. *The Universal Christ* (p. 12). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition. ↩
 4. Rohr, Richard. *The Universal Christ* (p. 14). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition. ↩
 5. Rohr, Richard. *The Universal Christ* (p. 16). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition. ↩