

Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 18, 2016
The Rev. Denise Trogdon

When Terror Meets Hope

O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel, Amen.

On this fourth Sunday of Advent it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas. Can't you feel the anticipation in the air? No, wait! That is anxiety. This season is filled with mixed emotions as we strive to meet our own and other's expectations. For a holiday that promotes peace on earth, there's an awful lot of uncivil, frenetic behavior that occurs this most wonderful time of the year. The incongruence hangs heavier for some, when family turmoil or distressing circumstances are at odds with the prevailing mood.

I always love when Matthew's gospel rendition of the beloved Christmas story is told, once every three years. This narrative, written from Joseph's perspective, portrays some of the humanity and struggle that lies beneath the sweet, endearing tale. Imagine the distress Joseph must have felt when he heard that his betrothed was pregnant. We tend to focus on the wonder of the birth, but if we could linger in the messiness of this moment, we might grasp a better understanding of our need for a savior.

We have domesticated this tale to edit out the heartache. That tableau of angels, shepherds and animals alongside of the adoring parents fits better with our conception of Christmas. Matthew at least acknowledges that Joseph was in a tough spot. Mary's engagement to Joseph in those days was not just a romantic declaration but a legal contract between families. Their houses had not yet been joined, nor the marriage consummated. Joseph's only logical conclusion was that Mary had been unfaithful. A righteous man had only two choices in those days: to declare his injury publicly where Mary would be stoned to death, or quietly divorce her. Joseph must have been overwhelmed by betrayal and grief.

The appearance of an angel in his dream would calm the waters but I think it is safe to say that the months leading up to Christ's birth were anything but blissful. The angel said "Do not be afraid," as Joseph looked devastation square in the face. What courage it must have taken to trust that the Lord of heaven and earth would be known through this difficult situation.

It shouldn't be lost on us that God would come to an ordinary girl, one of lowly status, the least expected place to find a savior. If we envision God dwelling only in holy and sacred spaces, like churches and monasteries, we miss those miracles of the mundane. We don't expect for God to show up at the grocery store or in traffic or amidst our daily chaos. And God surprises us every time when the divine emerges out of what seems dark and troubled. More often than not God appears in the face of things that most challenge us.

I am reminded of a retreat I went on years ago at the Holy Cross Abby in Berryville. It was a particularly messy time in my life where I was trying to sort through a lot of worldly noise. I looked forward to the quiet of this monastery where I felt I could encounter God. I had never done this before so I decided to structure my time by observing the hours the brothers did throughout the day, and attended each of the prayer services.

The time was 3:10 AM and seemed like a particularly ungodly hour to be facing the night air. The blast of cold was like standing in front of an open freezer door. I would have grumbled to the other travelers but the rule of silence kept the argument in my head. What in the world was I doing walking on a dark path in the middle of the night, when I could be warmly wrapped in the rest I needed? I was tired and feeling empty and thought to myself, I could turn around, but I forgot my flashlight and the way was totally dark. I was depending on the others' flashlight beams to keep me on the path. So we moved in silence together towards the chapel for the nightly office of vigils.

The chapel was dark and empty but for one candle on the altar and we watched and waited in silence as the monastery community gathered. One by one the brothers arrived and quietly the chants and prayers began. With each prayer of confession and song, a candle was lit and the atmosphere in the room moved from dark and somber to warmth and light. Something stirred in me that changed my sullen mood to a feeling of expectancy and hope. As this community of believers gathered in the dark and listened in the stillness, God was surely present. I left the chapel knowing that I had walked this path before and would walk it again. A disoriented moment in the dark is often the place where our terror meets hope.

When God came to earth to dwell in the person of Jesus Christ it was in a most unconventional way. A scandal for this terrified couple, yet they forged ahead in obedience. Christ was made manifest when despite his fear, Joseph reached out to Mary with grace and love. We too, can trust that God will be born in us in ways we can't even imagine. Rather than a chorus of angels, God comes quietly to vacant hearts, to messy situations, to dark paths, to bring hope and healing when we least expect it. But we must create a space for Christ to dwell within the landscape of our inner terrain. When unwelcomed wilderness comes into our tightly wrapped and tidy lives, we are undone just enough to make room for a savior.

This prayer written by Debra Thomas captures the essence of the journey we are on together and the hope God offers us. It is called -Why I stay:

“Because sorrow came too many times this year and there had better be an Afterward to explain it. I stood at gravesides and raged, my body betrayed me to panic, and my children knew fear and pain. Bodies failed, minds cracked, and we didn't live happily ever after like the fairy tales promised. Because all in all there are far too many unfinished stories, and I'd like to believe You are neater than that.

Because joy comes too, and it doesn't look anything like I think it should. Because rarely the veil parts, the ground gives way, the skies open, and my hunger for You intensifies to the breaking point of Communion.

The hunger itself becomes you. Incarnate. Shining. Present. I know You then in the liturgy, in the Word, in the broken bread and spilled wine. I hear You in the stillness of the forest, in the cacophony of birdsong. I feel You in the solid embrace of the people I love -- their hands, Your hands, their eyes, Your eyes, their voices, soft echoes of Yours. And in those moments, the possibility of You grows and grows until I am unhoused and undone, almost too alive for this world.

Our Advent journey is so much more than preparing for the joy of Christmas: it is the terrifying, exciting and passionate way of encountering Christ. In the times where the road seems

dark, remember that your terror will give way to hope and you can turn to your fellow travelers to light your way. May God bless us as we await the coming Christ who will be born in us in ways we cannot even imagine. Amen.