

## CHRISTMAS EVE 2013

**John 1:1-5, 10-14; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:1-10**  
**All Saints', Atlanta, Georgia**

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

*And this shall be a sign unto you: Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes,  
lying in a manger.*

On this Holy Night we go back to the beginning. We go back to the beginning and we listen for the Word. We listen for the creative Word. We look for the Word that calls universes into being and commands light out of darkness. We listen to and look for the Word that is the presence of the creator, what theologians will call "the divine self-disclosure." We go back to the beginning of creation and we listen and look for a Word of hope.

This Word is opaque for most of us at best, --at least until we are given ears with which to hear and eyes with which to see. And so the Creator of all that is, the Lord of Life, takes on the finitude of all created things. This finitude invites, implicitly, both loss and death. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in God this night who us born

into the world as a *sign*, divine self-disclosure, in one who begins life as a babe, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

The Word is a *sign*. The birth of this babe is *significant*. It *signifies* a relationship that is 'all in', a complete commitment of the Creator for the creation. And so the sign is a sign that the hope of the world is not misplaced, that justice can be achieved without violence and that some abstract notion of unity cannot subsume the importance of the particular, the historical and the stuff of real warp and woof, up and down, life and death relationship.

Reasonable and holy hope has been in short supply in recent years. Or at least I have found it hard to come by. As with most of you, I have been sustained at a personal level by all the things that really sustain our lives and which in some ways constitute a summary of our Lord's Prayer. We are sustained by daily bread, forgiveness, the capacity to be grateful and we are sustained by love. But on a larger national and international scale the birth of the babe of Bethlehem in that stable has been easy to forget in the face of formerly trustworthy institutions showing our trust misplaced. I have never sought salvation in politicians but I do expect the checks and balances of the finest democracy in the world to function to further commonality and even compassion

in our common life. As usual it is the poor, more than any other, that pay the price of governmental failure. I don't expect bankers to be particularly moral or immoral and I count some bankers among my friends, but the banking system is founded on trust.

That trust has been grievously betrayed. Has it not been those with the least resources who have been the first victims of banking practices that are apparently very difficult to control? There is bad news in the growing gap between rich and poor; bad news when we can't seem to muster the will to enact some well thought out and sensible, if minimal, restrictions on access to guns; and bad news in the plethora of books diagnosing the problems of churches as clergy plummet down the lists of trustworthy professions.

This Christmas however, I *am* finding renewed hope for the kind of justice that the prophets sought, and hope for the kind of mighty act of God that Paul and others saw in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This hope was for the justice that was called salvation, the kind of reasonable and holy hope that has led the faithful down the ages to create great institutions for good --starting with schools and hospitals for example. I have begun to find a renewed sense of real and holy hope in what, for me, is a most unlikely place. Pope Frances has awoken in me a glimmer of hope that there is such a thing as change we can believe in. Frances was not expected to be an agent of much change as far as I can tell from the copious press about him. Allegedly the runner

up to Cardinal Ratzinger, affectionately known by some of my Roman friends as “Papa Razzi”, Francis was expected to be of the same rule bound rigidity as his predecessor Benedict, and before him John Paul II. But as James Carroll has written of Francis “The move from rule by non-negotiable imperatives to leadership by invitation and welcome is as fundamental to the meaning of the faith as any dogma.”<sup>1</sup> As the conservatives in his own church like to point out, he has changed no fundamental doctrine, but he has changed the tone of the papacy, focusing more on *people* than on rules, and especially on those people who are poor and marginalized. He has made symbolic gestures of style that seem to be ones for which the world is hungry, giving up his palace and those rather dodgy red slippers. The effect is timely and dramatic for Christians of all stripes everywhere. Of course he is being challenged and attacked, but practice does shape belief even as belief shapes practice. Maybe he will even move closer to our Anglican project of finding Catholicity first in relationship and allowing that to shape doctrine rather than the other way around. He gives me hope that real, systemic, important change is possible through following the way of Jesus, --a way that presents a fundamentally different narrative to the violent narratives of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> James Carroll, *Who Am I to Judge?* in *The New Yorker*, December 23 \$ 30, 2013 p.81

I have found Christmas hope in reflecting again on the life of Nelson Mandela, another man for whom the symbolic gesture was world changing. He refused to condemn those who had condemned him. He initiated a process of truth and reconciliation. He reached across the racial divide of his country through the medium of sport, rugby to be specific. Even the journals and commentators who have gone to town with glee when Pope Frances has wondered in an interview about whether greed is essential to capitalism, --even they have written in praise of the extraordinary character of this extraordinary man.

And closer to home I find sparks of renewed hope in our newish Bishop Rob Wright. Bishop Wright is bringing some real shape to our diocese by discouraging business as usual, urging us to dare greatly, recognizing that vision will be resisted but urging the courage that comes from faith. He is not only speaking words, but providing tools in the form of teachers and conferences for clergy and lay alike. He is not going to lead a church in decline; he is going to help us become again a lively community of Jesus for the future. Among the things he said to the 600 people gathered for Jane Weston's Ordination to the Diaconate last Saturday (Well, I should admit that there were a few others being ordained as well at that same service...) --He urged us to be courageous in the assurance of our value in the face of God's love for us. Among the

things that our Bishop said was this: "Pay close attention here because courage attracts critics. And the status quo will elegantly defend itself as you try to break free from the alligator's jaws." Bishop Wright is preaching to the converted here at All Saints', but he is saying what needs to be said to many a tired and anxious priest in many a tired and anxious parish. He will be with us for our parish weekend next fall and perhaps you will find some renewed hope for yourself.

Even closer to home, in the early hours of this morning there was a fire on our block that began in the upstairs apartment over J R Crickets which threatened the formerly homeless men of Covenant Community next door. Fortunately there was Terry, a faithful employee of Goodfellas into the early hours of the morning. Sometime before dawn Terry was keeping watch over the block by night, when a flickering light spurred *him* to action. He brought tidings of not such good news on the face of it to the residents of the Covenant Community, but actually really good news that they would not be homeless once again through fire. He had seen a fire and woke the sleepers from slumber in their meager stable. He went on to spread the news abroad with a deft tug on the fire alarm just inside the Covenant door. What give me hope is not only the capacity to have a little Christmas fun in the face of near tragedy, but also the reality of the community of this small insignificant block where important things happen and holy

hope is reborn, faith restored, lives, quite literally saved, and all as a response to that birth in Bethlehem all those years ago.

Kathy Lee has written a beautiful poem for Christmas, the basis for the elegant gradual anthem we heard tonight. Eric Nelson was commissioned by Ray and Beth Chenault to compose the work. It captures our longing for real hope and begins “Somewhere in time we hear the cry...” It speaks of the invitation to find renewed hope awakened as we remember the babe of Bethlehem and his story. It points to our being reborn continually in God’s grace as we return to seek the Word in that meager stable and “To celebrate the Lord of Life who waits to meet us there. “

This is invitation to anyone who has wanted renewed hope. Join us here. Recommit your lives to following the way of Jesus this night, or perhaps commit for the first time and join us in being a people of hope in a hopeless world. If you decide to recommit yourself or commit your life to what really matters for the first time, be sure and tell someone else what you did. As family we remember. Together, we gather and return to the stable bare, to celebrate the Lord of Life who waits to meet us there.”

*(The choir repeats the final musical line of “The Infant Child”)*

AMEN. AMEN.