

May your mind come alive this Advent  
To the invisible geography  
That invites you to new frontiers,  
To break the dead shell of yesterdays,  
To risk being disturbed and changed.

May you have the courage this Advent  
To live the life that you would love,  
To postpone your dream no longer  
But do at last what you came here for  
And waste your heart on fear no more.

John O'Donohue

### **“Christmas People”**

Sermon for Sunday, December 18, 2011 by The Rev. Joe Summers.

(Readings: 2 Samuel 7:1-11,16, The Magnificat, Romans 16:25-27, Luke 1:26-38)

Christmas is about, not just the birth of Jesus, but the birth of a Christmas people, a new humanity in whom God dwells and acts here on earth.

Mark's gospel, the earliest gospel we have in the Bible--begins simply: “The Beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.” The gospel appears not to have a real ending, as it ends with the women fleeing from the empty tomb, with no explanation. But Mark wants us to understand that his gospel is only the beginning. The remainder of the story of the good news of Jesus Christ continues to this day.

In Mark's gospel there is no Christmas story. The story of Christmas only comes later with the gospels of Luke and Matthew. Historically, the celebration of Christmas came significantly later than the celebration of Easter. In the earliest church, the focus was all on Easter. Christmas probably wasn't celebrated. It was only when Jesus didn't return as people expected, riding high in the sky, overthrowing every earthly power and establishing the reign of God on earth, that people began to think that maybe the return of Jesus is about something different, or if not, maybe there is something that we are supposed to be doing here on earth--until Jesus returns. The Christmas stories are all about what it means for the Infinite to be born into human history. They give us a guide for how the infinite yearns to express itself in our lives and our time, and what it means to be a Christmas people.

I suspect it has to do with the perilous nature of our evolution as a species, but humanity seems to have been fundamentally shaped by the paradigm of domination. It's a paradigm that says we are safest when we are controlled by fear and shame. In the paradigm of domination, affirmation and approval are to be withheld, until you become whom the group thinks you need to be. But if you are living from the outside in, if you are living controlled by the group and

its vision of who you are supposed to be, you are alienated from the Imago Dei, our nature as it was created in the image of the Creator, the God of freedom. So how do we move from a world where everyone feels they earn their worth by meeting the expectations of others, particularly those who are over them in the social hierarchy, to a new humanity who understands their inherent goodness, who live from the inside out, who live lives of a freedom that is expressed in their creativity and the responsibility they take for the world and one another?

Rene Girard, the famous French anthropologist, suggests that we can begin to see the emergence of this new humanity in human history in and through the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Girard feels that the new paradigm of relationship that emerges with Jesus is such a radical break from the past, such a fundamental shift in the whole way life, love and relationships are understood, that it could only have happened in and through God intervening in human history.

What is it that is so striking about Jesus? He is one who experiences himself and humanity as beloved of God. He is one who acts to bring an end to the vision of the God of domination, the idol who calls us to sacrifice ourselves and others for social harmony. He is one in whom we see the God, who stands in solidarity with humanity, calling us into living the life of the Beloved Community. He is one who opens up the vision of this new humanity, reborn in freedom and love, and who infectiously brings that gift to others.

As we hear in our gospel today, Luke also sees Jesus as the turning point in human history, but Luke also says that Jesus didn't emerge out of nowhere. His birth, his vision, and his witness had to do with many people whose faithfulness enabled him to see and claim this new light. These are the people we are introduced to in the narratives about the birth of Jesus. They tell us something about how Jesus came to be who he was. They tell us something about what it might mean if we were to become who we are, that is, if we fully realize the Imago Dei within us.

There is Mary--a wild young woman. Instead of being ashamed at finding herself an unwed teenage mother, Mary proclaims that her soul glorifies God, magnifies the Lord. She claims her unborn son will be a child of God, one through whom God will act in a mighty way to bring the reign of God on earth. Stories often get more and more exaggerated over time, so we don't know how much of this Mary actually proclaimed at the time. What we know is that something powerful happened for a poor peasant, on the edges of the Roman Empire, to have the idea that he could help remake the whole world and save humanity (in a non-delusional way). What we do know is that Jesus held up his mother as a key example of the power that is unleashed, when we respond to God in faith. When someone tries to claim Mary is great, because she was Jesus' biological mother, by saying "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that you sucked," Jesus' response was, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of god and Keep it!" Mary is great, because she is an example of the new humanity, the humanity that happens when we are open to the Infinite living in us and acting through us.

But in Luke's Gospel, it says that it was not only a teenage mom who helps prepare the way for Jesus, it was also a group of wild, older people. It was faithful Elizabeth, who had endured

a lifetime of shame for being barren, which she was able to cast aside, as she gave birth to the boy who became known as John the Baptist. It was her old husband Zechariah. They seemed to have shared Mary's kind of faith in whom and what their son was going to do. There are the elderly Simeon and the prophetess Anna--they too are presented, as having spent a lifetime preparing the way for the Infinite to be born in their midst. Mary, Elizabeth, Zechariah, Simeon and Anna all testify to what faithful waiting and watching is about. It's not about being passive, it's about an active expectation and openness that helps to give birth to a new reality.

Christmas happened through a holy people in whom God's Spirit dwelled. Christmas happens through people who live with heart and Spirit and whose witness testifies to Emmanuel--God with us--God in solidarity with humanity. No longer is God the lynchpin of domination, the one whom Karl Marx called "the heart of a heartless world." God is not the kind of ally that we're so familiar with, the kind of ally who comes to the aid of weaker parties, and through shock and awe campaigns, obliterates their enemies, and who, in the process, leaves those they're trying to help marginalized, powerless, helpless, and dependent. Instead, God is an ally whose solidarity is best expressed in the presence of a baby. We are entrusted with the life of the Creator of the universe in the vulnerable form of a baby. The presence of that vulnerable love and beauty evokes in us a fundamental transformation in which we emerge into the grace and glory of being fully human, and the creativity and responsibility that comes with being free people.

This Christmas, let us be--Christmas people.

Let us prepare the way for the Lord, a pathway for our God, in the wilderness of this world:

- \*where such a large percentage of our sisters and brothers are deprived of their essential needs for food, clothing, shelter, unpolluted water, healthcare, love and support,
- \*where a tiny minority of our sister and brothers live lives of incredible wealth that cut them off from the earthy reality of love, the incredible cycle of giving and receiving, rooted in our most basic needs,
- \*and where another group of us live lives of relative comfort, but have not had the courage, the creativity, and the commitment to transform this injustice, so that all of humanity might experience deliverance from the dominion of death.

Let us prepare the way for God, a God space, in the wilderness of our hearts:

- \*let us let life destroy the illusions that would keep us safe and yet cut off from the reality of living and love. Let us let God resurrect crushed hopes, expectations, and dreams--that we might live out the glory of our lives,
- \*let us let the presence of God evoke God in us, so that we might know the fullness of our humanity, so that we might live our lives as free people, people reborn in and through the love of a Creator, who loves us for who we are, for whom we don't need to prove anything to receive love, one whose love leaves us feeling so incredibly grateful, that we feel impelled to see that others can also know this kind of love and freedom.

Let us, this Christmas, make a space for our children, to know God's radical affirmation of us, a

solidarity that does not diminish us, but magnifies us, through the miracle of unconditional giving... through food and time with one another... through beautiful lights that shine in the darkness of our homes and streets... and through the most incredible music and songs of hope and expectation and longing that this miracle of the incarnation has given rise to.

But let us also make space for us to experience and know the One whose gift of self and presence has inspired all this celebration. Let us take seriously God's call for us to be reborn in and through grace, and through claiming the love and freedom that seem key to the fulfillment of humanity's and creation's dream of living in peace and love.

For if we are willing, God is able, and if we are ready, God has already gone ahead to prepare a way for us. Amen.