

SERMON
12/15/19

Through the eyes of another: now and not yet

Maybe you're not supposed to admit this if you're a pastor, but I've been running a good bit behind in my own personal Advent journey this year. We were away and missed church on December 1st when Susan introduced this year's Advent theme. And at home, I didn't have time at home after Thanksgiving to start preparing for Christmas.

I didn't get a chance to create the dining table centerpiece that usually serves as our Advent wreath. I need and long for this simple regular reminder to pause - even if only for a moment each day - to reflect on how the ancient story of Jesus' birth may be connecting with our lives and world right now.

This week, I finally pulled out an oil lamp that is similar to the one pictured on our bulletin cover. Over the remaining days in Advent, I want to pray the Jan Richardson blessing at home, too - seeking the "love that illumines every broken thing it finds".

As I was unpacking other decorations, I came across an old blue plastic notebook from my mother. A yellowed dog-eared label on the spine reads: "*MADONNA & CHILD (artists of different cultures)*". On the front is taped a card with 10 pictures of faces of children from around the world, and Jesus' words: *I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. (John 10:10)*

Through the Eyes of Another

The artists represented in my mother's notebook interpreted a sacred story from long ago about the birth of a Jewish baby in Bethlehem. Jesus' arrival to bring life to the world is depicted through the lens of their own cultures and moments in time.

Looking at this visual art reminded me of us considering Jesus' birth story this year through songs that grew out of the experience of African-American people enslaved in the U.S. Why would we - a privileged, mostly white congregation in 2019 - prepare for Christmas with an Advent series based on the experience of people with whom many of us don't seem to have much in common?

Over the last weeks, we've heard some hard truths; and taken a gritty look at the experience of enslaved people in the U.S. What have we learned? How has it changed us? What now?

How do we try to faithfully live into the *now* of God's vision for ourselves and the world - even as we're faced with so much evidence of the *not yet* that we see in and around us? Where do we find the hope and courage we need? There are certainly no easy answers.

As I thought about our Advent dialogue with unlikely conversation partners, my mind went to the book *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible*. It describes a research project that brought together "ordinary Bible readers" and pastors and theologians - from many countries and cultures spanning five continents.

The book includes nine case studies of groups from different contexts who were paired to read and reflect together on the John 4 story of Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman. Members of a Bible school class from Cape Town, South Africa and a group of highly educated professionals from Amsterdam, Netherlands were paired together, for example.

John Riches, one of the researchers, reported that the project showed that this kind of intercultural exchange is "fraught with difficulty - but at its best can be transformative and renewing". (473)

"In this process [of reading the Bible together]," he wrote, "participants allow their understanding of the text to be enlarged by looking at it through the eyes of others whose readings, like their own, arise from the exchange between experience and the biblical texts." (461)

How might our understanding of the Advent texts be enlarged, informed, and transformed by the theology of enslaved people as expressed in spirituals that sprung from the exchange between their experience and biblical texts?

We clearly don't want to appropriate experiences we haven't faced nor can even imagine.

At the same time, our understanding of and respect for the life and witness of other people can be deepened and broadened. In the process, so too can our sense of the power and scope of what God is up to in the world through Jesus Christ.

In her book *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again*, Rachel Held Evans acknowledges the importance of understanding the context and original audience for which Scripture emerged. But she writes that “we dare not forgo the long and crucial tradition of *sacred appropriation*, of allowing these ancient stories to speak fresh life into new, fitting, contexts. ...[It’s] especially important,” she writes, “for those of us who come to the Bible from positions of relative social, economic, and racial privilege to read its stories alongside people from marginalized communities, past and present, who are often more practiced at tracing that crimson thread of justice through its pages.” (40-41)

Claiming and singing an alternative reality

What does it mean to do theology in harsh situations in which the “kingdom of God” that Jesus taught so clearly does *not yet* exist? From what did enslaved people who sang spirituals draw - towards finding the hope, strength, and power to transcend their circumstances? To survive, imagine, escape, resist, circumvent, change, act, love, and live on?

As Cheryl Kirk-Duggan and Marilyn E. Thornton, the African-American writers of this year’s Advent materials, note: “What imaginations the slaves had as they birthed *Children, Go Where I Send Thee!*” (This morning’s spiritual.) She writes that being brought to America in chains and forced into slavery “did not stop the Africans or their descendants from using their own imaginations to sing about the freedom of movement, going from one place to another. It did not stop them from watching, waiting, and wondering about a time when they, too, would be at liberty to go where God would send them. (22)

“[The] singers are transported in their minds to a state in which their bodies are free to live and move and have their being in God (Acts 17:28),” they write.

This expresses what they call a theology of movement.

“In a world that sought to control even their religious meetings and right to assembly, they gathered - one by one or ten by ten. They subversively taught and practiced counting as they sang about being sent out in varying numbers. They moved and clapped, and experienced joy and fulfillment in a pattern of movement that transported them away from the bonds of slavery into the freedom of salvation in Jesus Christ.” (24)

From my vantage point, what's most striking about these spirituals is that they bear witness to the deep and enduring faith of a people born into a hostile *not yet* time and place. Faced with a kind of struggle that I can't imagine, they drew a surprising amount of strength and courage from God and one another. Right in the midst of their current situation, they found ways to claim and to hold onto and to start to live out the alternative *now* that God had in mind for them through the birth of Jesus told with beautiful simplicity in Luke 2:1-7.

They found and sang real hope in the midst of real trouble.

Beyond paralysis

Their witness teaches me that the alternative worldview that Jesus' birth, life, and teachings pointed to is so much bigger and a source of so much more power than I could ever begin to grasp by myself - stretching across time, place, and culture.

How do we watch and listen for signs of that worldview in our own time and place? Even in times when we feel overwhelmed by seemingly intractable suffering in the world, how can we claim and sing and start to live out God's just and merciful *now* as a source of hope for ourselves and others in times and places of trouble?

This Advent, the hard reality of the *not yet* and the promise of the *now* are on my mind as I think back on an evening in late February or early March of this year. I left the church office that night at about 6:00 p.m. - pulling out of the parking lot, turning left on Concord, and then left again on Grant Street. As I stopped at the stop sign at Mulberry and then pulled out, I glanced to my left. There I saw a young girl who looked about ten-years-old standing outside the apartment there. Beside her was a small pile of laundry and a bucket from which she had just pulled an adult-sized sweater that she was trying to wring out and hang over the chain link fence. It looked soaking wet - heavy with water - and I remember thinking two things: *That will never dry.* and *It's too dark and cold for her to be outside.*

Stunned, I drove away - trying to think what I might do. We were still living in Exton, so I couldn't offer the use of my washer and dryer. Plus, I was a stranger who certainly couldn't take a child to my home, in any case, without her parent's permission. In the end, I continued on my way - resolving to keep a lookout for the girl and her parents in hopes of striking up a conversation during daylight hours to try to learn what they might need.

But I never saw her again. A week or two later the apartment was empty.

This little girl comes to mind when I think of the *not yet* in my new community of Lancaster - where I'm becoming aware that many families face systemic inequities in terms of education, income, and housing. As goes without saying, a child shouldn't have to be washing clothes in a bucket outside on a cold dark night in winter in Pennsylvania. In that moment, that little girl didn't need my pity or guilt when I thought of my own family's relative privilege. What she seemed to need - based on that brief moment in which I saw her - was a world where her parents have a fair chance to provide decent affordable housing for their family and perhaps before or after school care for her.

Some evidence of God's alternative world happening here in the *now* offers Advent hope to me. I'm very excited about the Grant Street Committee's proposal to renovate our empty building on Grant Street and create much-needed stable low-income housing on the second floor. I really hope we can get that done.

And I think of those of you who volunteer with or donate to MOOS - Mornings On Orange Street - a program that provides free before school care here in this building to local working families.

I also think of those of you who volunteer with children through the Lancaster City schools.

In the face of the stark reality of the *not yet* of our world, it's easy to become overwhelmed and paralyzed. But I don't want to be paralyzed. I want to act to be part of God's alternative worldview - the *now* that Jesus' birth, life, and teachings pointed to.

I'm reminded that God's new just and merciful order is so much bigger and a source of so much more power than I can ever begin to grasp by myself - stretching across time, place, and culture.

With deep respect for the testimony of enslaved people who sang hope in trouble and in gratitude for you gathered here who will be sent out - one by one, two by two, three by three - with God's invitation to bear witness in your own lives this week, I want to close by praying the Jan Richardson blessing once again:

Blessed are you

Blessed are you
who bear the light
in unbearable times,
who testify
to its endurance
amid the unendurable,
who bear witness
to its persistence
when everything seems
in shadow
and grief.

Blessed are you
in whom
the light lives,
in whom
the brightness blazes—
your heart
a chapel,
an altar where
in the deepest night
can be seen
the fire that
shines forth in you
in unaccountable faith,
in stubborn hope,
in love that illumines
every broken thing
it finds.

from *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons*, by Jan Richardson