

December 22, 2019
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Advent IV -- Hope In Trouble
"Where the Picture Points"

[Luke 2:8-20](#)

This is the fourth and final Sunday of our Advent theme: Hope in Trouble, using African-American spirituals as our primary resource and reference point as we navigate this liturgical season.

There's an audacity to the African-American spiritual tradition that I desperately desire. I thought I knew why — I thought it was born of a need to somehow *earn* the privilege of singing them, as if somehow I could study enough, shed my white privilege enough, to have access to them.

I would like to think that my desire is rooted in “sacred appropriation” — as coined by Rachel Held Evans in *Walking on Water, Slaying Giants and Loving the Bible Again*, and shared with us last week by Leslie. Sacred appropriation is inviting "stories to speak fresh life into new, fitting, contexts. ... [It's] especially important 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)

But if I'm honest, there is some ulterior motive in me, which is my own redemption. As if I could somehow be saved or forgiven if I could withstand truly understanding the extent of brutality that has been dealt to the people of African descent who were brought here against their will, and the lingering effects, and ongoing injustice, still meted out to their descendants today.

Knowing that history, facing those *realities* IS important — is essential. And I'm grateful that Jonathan shared some parts of that story with us two weeks ago, in more detail than may be considered “appropriate.” But let us remember, too, that it was the facts that were “inappropriate” the actual lived history and current realities that are “inappropriate.” There is no way to accurately convey such inappropriateness in an appropriate way. And church is, I hope, a place where we can dare to look together at that which must be changed, redeemed and transformed.

But ultimately, that history, and these beautiful, beautiful songs are not a backdrop for my personal salvation story.

What these spirituals get, that I somehow never really got before, is that “Advent is not just preparation for the Christmas season.” In the words of our Advent resource this year: "Advent is the preparation in our hearts for the second coming of Jesus Christ. The season serves as our confession that even though we did not know who Jesus was when God came wrapped in flesh the first time, we are cultivating a value system that embraces the hope, joy, transformation and communal healing that will be realized when Christ returns. African American spirituals provide an excellent medium by which to cross the divide between the first and second coming of Christ. Through them, all people can come to a better understanding of the unconditional love, justice, mercy, hope, faith, and community that Jesus brings for the flourishing of all God's children. The African American spiritual represents a unique form in sacred music. The theology of spirituals speaks not only of God 'who sits high and looks low' but one who profoundly and unequivocally identifies with those experiencing a world of cruelty, injustice, poverty,

racism, and oppression." (*Mary Had a Baby: An Advent Bible Study Based on African-American Spirituals*, by Cheryl Kirk-Duggan and Marilyn E. Thornton)

The writers of the spirituals were masters of sacred appropriation — taking the stories of scripture and laying them onto their lived experience and using them to help guide and inspire actions that will bring liberation and hope. And it happens over and over. The spirituals themselves were written with these double stories, with double meanings in their own time. And many of them have been appropriated again, for example during the Civil Rights movement.

Fannie Lou Hamer, songstress of the Civil Rights movement, took up “Go, Tell It On the Mountain” and changed the words from “when Jesus Christ was born,” to “set my people free” —carrying the Christmas story *and* the history of the song’s role in the stories of liberating enslaved peoples in this country and carrying that into the continued work for justice in the 1960s

One of my favorite Christmas hymns is one that we’re going to sing later in the service. In fact, it’s *two* hymns, *What Child is This?* with a newer hymn, *Helpless and Hungry*, woven in between the verses, and then literally sung at the same time, overlapping one another.

It’s a different way of appropriating — leaving the original intact, and laying over top of it new words, words that express our hope for the words of the original to meet us where we are now: our hope for the reality of that first story to intertwine with our reality now, and our hope for the first coming to help us see the second coming, and to help us see where Christ is among us now.

I saw a political cartoon this week on someone’s Facebook feed, and it stopped me in my tracks:



I wasn't able to trace its origin, although I know it's at least two years old. It depicts a group of people gathered around a painting that is clearly for sale. The painting is of a homeless person, huddled on the bare ground. The viewers of the painting have clearly walked right past the actual homeless person who is huddled on the very street they're standing on, who is the subject of the painting, and their footprints suggest that they didn't even see the person, at the least they don't appear to have stopped or even paused by them.

This image helped take me one step further in my thinking about Advent and the spirituals, and sacred appropriation.

We can paint our very best pictures — so accurate, so unflinchingly honest, but if our images do nothing to point us toward their subjects, what are they? Perhaps the question is not rightly put to the image, but to the viewers — if we are not moved by *moving* images to consider the realities they depict, who are *we*?

This morning's portion of the Christmas story is of the shepherds being visited by an angel, a "messenger of God." The angel says, "You have nothing to fear! I bring *good* news of *great* joy for all people. The Messiah has been born *to you*. The sign, the way you'll know it's the Messiah, is that you'll find a baby wrapped in a simple cloth, and lying in a manger." And suddenly there were a multitude of messengers singing about peace coming to the world.

What's interesting is that the shepherds didn't just take it all in and then keep going about their business. No, the message given them by the messengers of God inspired them to become messengers themselves. They followed the visual picture they were given by the angel, and sought out the subject of the painting — and indeed they found Mary, Joseph and Jesus.

And then they went around sharing the message all over the place

So, if the definition of angel is "messenger of God," you could say that one of the miracles of the Christmas story is that a bunch of shepherds became angels!

I think this is some of what this morning's spiritual is also doing — pushing us away from our inclination to simply around the picture, and instead saying, "Go!" "Go tell it on the mountain! From the highest, most conspicuous place. Whatever goodness and truth and inspiration you find here, it's not meant to *stay* here. It points. It points outside itself — outside its' frame."

The angels' message pointed to Jesus. Jesus' message pointed, always, beyond himself, too — pointed to those considered the "least" consequential, the least powerful, the least *re*-spected, the least *ex*-pected. I would argue even the 10 Commandments, the Torah and the prophets all tried to point — tried to point us to one another in *merciful* and *just* ways.

And the spirituals so profoundly and miraculously pointed, too. They pointed the listener(s)/the singer(s) out beyond the Christmas story — pointed them to liberation *in their own time and place*. They pointed not just to hope, but to action and liberation, and to *stepping out in* faith and hope to seize it.

My deep desire is that our worship here in this place *not* be a re-enactment of that picture — in that cartoon, but that whatever images we project, whatever stories we tell, they truly point to reality, and call us to engage the real, not just the depiction of it.

I don't think God came to live in this world as a child so that we would paint Nativities and frame them and ponder them.

Let us not be *these* people. Let this not be how we view the Christmas story. Let this not be how we tell the Christmas story.

Maybe this is what God was actually doing in the incarnation — thinking: “These stories and images aren’t enough — the people just don’t get it, don’t see where the stories were supposed to point them to. I will *become* the man on the street. I will step out of the frame, and *become* the one I am trying to point to.”

And God is still there — which is to say God is still *here*.

The second coming of the Messiah, which we await in Advent, may be out there before us in some point of history. Certainly our scriptures are full of people being all sorts of wrong about the Messiah the first time around, so I’m quite sure any guess I’d hazard about a second coming would be equally wrong and laughable in the eyes of history. But, like I have preached in almost every Easter sermon here at CMCL, we may never know the mystery of incarnation, or resurrection, but we absolutely know where Jesus told his followers to look for him when he was inevitably no longer with them. In whoever is considered to be “the least” by “the world,” whoever is considered to be “the least” by ourselves.

So, let us be not mere viewers of this miraculous story, not mere hearers of these beautiful songs, forged of courage in suffering, of hope in trouble. Let us, like the shepherds, become angels — messengers of God — and go tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ, God-with-us — the least of us — is born. The picture has become real.