

Growing in Hope

John Wilkinson

Third Presbyterian Church

December 22, 2013 (Fourth Sunday of Advent)

Isaiah 7:10-16

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-25

This has been an Advent filled with poetry. Poetry can save your life, the poet Maurice Saatchi wrote. I don't know if that's true. (I don't even know if it can save a sermon!) But I do know that poetry can deepen a conversation about faith and the meaning of this season. This morning's poems will bear re-reading; they are printed in your bulletin. As we think about *hope*, hear this provocative poem by Judith Ortiz Cofer called "The Game," and as you do, place yourself in the roles of the various characters.

"The little humpbacked girl
did not go to school,
but was kept home to help her mother,
an unsmiling woman with other children
whose spines were not twisted
into the symbol of a family's shame.

At birth,
on first seeing the child
curled into a question mark,
the eternal *why*
she would have to carry home,
she gave her the name of Cruz,
for the cross Christ bore
to Calvary.

In my house,
we did not speak of her affliction,
but acted as if Cruz,
whose lovely head
sat incongruously upon a body
made of stuck-together parts –
like a child's first attempt
at cutting and pasting a paper doll –
was the same
as any of my other friends.

But when she stood at our door,
waiting for me to go out and play,
Mother fell silent, awed, perhaps,
by the sight
of one of her God's mysteries.

Running to her backyard,
Cruz and I entered a playhouse
she had built of palm fronds
where we'd play her favorite game: "family."
I was always cast in the role
of husband or child – perfect
in my parts – I'd praise her lavishly

for the imaginary dishes
she placed before me,
while she laughed, delighted
at my inventions, lost in the game,
until it started getting too late
to play pretend.”

We carry the question of the “eternal why,” and for us, the Christmas answer comes not in words or theories or propositions, but in flesh and blood.

The fancy term is incarnation. Flesh and blood. Humanity. Look at the people to your right and left, in front of you and behind. Look at the people who we served lunch to yesterday, a delicious lunch, at Dining Room Ministry. Look at the people to whom we delivered food baskets yesterday. Look at the people in line at Target, or crawling slowly on 490 this week, or nervously navigating the East Avenue Wegman’s parking lot. Look at the people, young ones, singing or playing in one holiday concert after another. Look at the people lining up on one side of a controversy or another. Look around. Look in their faces. There you will find Christmas.

Look in the mirror. There you will find Christmas as well.

Not off somewhere, or in a theological volume. But in flesh and blood, who was born like the rest of us were, remotely, to a scared young woman and a father trying to do the right thing, in a world marked by brokenness and need and fear, not much different from this world.

We have dubbed this year for Third Church a Year of Growing. Over the summer, I came up with a crazy idea that Becky D’Angelo-Veitch and John Pilato and Carl Wheeler executed beautifully. Big letters, big, 4 foot plywood letters that spelled out “G-R-O-W” on our East Avenue lawn. We signed them on Rally Day, and I can tell you that people have noticed them...including vandals, who knocked two of the letters down a week ago.

Whether they were clever, or just lazy or scared or inebriated to finish the job, the two letters remaining spelled another word -- "O-W" -- "ow."

I want to thank them, in a way, because it seems as if one takeaway from all of this is the very truth of incarnation. That is to say, if God comes to us in human form, as we believe, then God comes to us in brokenness and imperfection. We know what life that baby will live in adulthood. He will do extraordinary things, transformative things. But he will also be hurt and rejected and mocked, and, ultimately, killed for who he is and what he's done.

I say that now not to take the joy or hope or the wondrous anticipation out of our Christmas preparations. Not at all. To acknowledge the deep humanity of this season, Jesus' and ours, is to acknowledge the deeper joy and hope of this season.

That is to say that we know that "OW" is real. Churches hold "Blue" Christmas services not to be depressing, but to be real and true to our experience. Christmas does not always bring about the perfect scenario portrayed in TV ads or cards or songs. Like life itself, this season can be hard, and not always merry or bright.

But because God came to us as a tiny, vulnerable baby born in the most difficult of circumstances, that means that God is with us -- that is what Emmanuel means. God is with us as we live with strained and broken relationships. God is with us as we miss people we love, whose legacies remain with us but whose deaths diminish us. God is with us as we take small steps, modest acts, to ameliorate violence or poverty or hunger or other human need, and wonder if it makes a difference at all. God is with us...Emmanuel.

That news, to me, is the foundation for every gathering, every meal shared, every reunion marked, and it is true not in spite of our human efforts to capture the vision and meaning of Christmas, but made more true, more real, because of our efforts.

Throughout Advent, we have heard the words of the prophet Isaiah...swords into plowshares, righteousness, equity, wolf and lamb, deserts rejoicing, weak strengthened, fearful brave.

At the same time, we have had John the Baptist's in your face declaration of unhappiness about the way things are. To think about how the world is and how God envisions it to be is not to get lost in the hopelessness of this moment, but rather is to be drawn into the deeper hope of working for change, working, with others, for change, working, with God, for change, because God loves this world so much that love came down in this improbable, vulnerable form.

The struggles we carry, whether they are individual or communal, do not disappear, but their burden is relocated because of this good news. Our lives are not easier because of the incarnation, nor is our deep fear and brokenness magically eliminated. But we view it differently, do we not, because an angel appeared to Mary, and to Joseph, and to shepherds, and said "be not afraid...do not be afraid" God is with us. Us.

Prior to the 10:45 service every Sunday, the Chancel Choir gathers in the Gosnell Cloister. They have rehearsed and robed and popped their cough drops and are ready for action. We share a brief prayer, for their leadership and for our gathering, and then we come into the Sanctuary.

Last Sunday, as we were looking out at a very different view on East Avenue than this morning's, lots of snow rather than rain, many choir members noticed that our "G" and "R" were missing and that we were saying "OW" to the city. But one clever choir member said not so fast. To look at it another way, he said, we were saying "WO...W-O...WO" As in "WOW."

We have taken all the letters down for the season. They will reappear when the weather gets better, sometime in June or July. But for now, the message lingers. All of the messages linger. GROW and OW and WO are all inter-related, are they not, this Christmas, in the very profound news of a tiny little baby born to us, whose very life will change the world. Whose very human life, flesh and blood, love-incarnate life, will change the world.

One last poem, at least until the next one, from William Carlos Williams...listen for the promise of "Spring and All..."

By the road to the contagious hospital
under the surge of the blue
mottled clouds driven from the
northeast—a cold wind. Beyond, the

waste of broad, muddy fields
brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen

patches of standing water
the scattering of tall trees

All along the road the reddish
purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy
stuff of bushes and small trees
with dead, brown leaves under them
leafless vines—

Lifeless in appearance, sluggish
dazed spring approaches—

They enter the new world naked,
cold, uncertain of all
save that they enter. All about them
the cold, familiar wind—

Now the grass, tomorrow
the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf

One by one objects are defined—
It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf

But now the stark dignity of
entrance—Still, the profound change
has come upon them: rooted they
grip down and begin to awaken”

Wait. Prepare. Anticipate. Be alert. Pay attention. Watch. Change. Hope...even hope. Things are beginning to awaken. God is with us. Merry Christmas. Amen.