

Reconciliation and Hope

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Isaiah 7:10-16 and Matthew 1:18-25

“Hope is the thing with feathers,” Emily Dickinson wrote.

“Hope is the thing with feathers/
That perches in the soul,
/And sings the tune
without the words,
/And never stops at all...”

We will sing and pray and consider hope this morning. We will do it late in Advent, filled with anticipation, through a particular voice – Mary’s voice.

We have heard Matthew’s streamlined version of the annunciation, the angelic announcement of Jesus’ impending birth and its miraculous circumstances. Notice that Matthew focuses on Joseph, and that the birth itself merits only one part of one sentence. That is fine, of course, but it seems to me that on this day, it is permissible to sneak over into Luke’s gospel as well, where Mary is the focal point and the birth does not yet happen.

We know the story. Gabriel, the angel, appears to Elizabeth, and tells her that she will bear a son named John. Six months into Elizabeth’s pregnancy, that same angel appears to Elizabeth’s cousin, a young woman named Mary. The words the angel spoke to Joseph in Matthew – “do not be afraid” – are repeated to Mary here, and then Gabriel shares the news. Mary hears, considers, questions, then accepts. “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” The angel departs and Mary responds. Her words are called the Magnificat, as they magnify God, and God’s promise, and God’s vision.

‘My soul cries out with a joyful shout
that the God of my heart is great,
And my spirit sings of the wondrous things
that you bring to the ones who wait.
You fixed your sight on the servant's plight,
and my weakness you did not spurn,

So from east to west shall my name be blest.
Could the world be about to turn?

Refrain:

My heart shall sing of the day you bring.
Let the fires of your justice burn.
Wipe away all tears,
For the dawn draws near,
And the world is about to turn.

The dawn draws near. A song of hope. In his pivotal work called *Theology of Hope*, the German theologian Jurgen Moltmann asserts that the hope of faith does not flee the world, or resign, or escape. It does not go to some imagined heavenly bliss, "nor does it sever itself from the earth." (page 21) Hope is "realistic," Moltmann writes, because "it alone takes seriously the possibilities (of)...reality." (page 25)

Realistic hope. I can live with that. It feels true. This hope places our challenges, our sufferings, our fears, our little deaths and big ones, in a different context. And it does not allow us to be distracted by the sparkly and shiny things of life. Even more than that, this hope calls for a cosmic reboot, whereby the calculus of death and life is transformed, and the very essence of power is redefined. Mary understood that.

Though I am small, my God, my all,
you work great things in me.
And your mercy will last from the depths of the past
to the end of the age to be.
Your very name puts the proud to shame,
and to those who would for you yearn,
You will show your might, put the strong to flight,
for the world is about to turn.

Refrain:

My heart shall sing of the day you bring.
Let the fires of your justice burn.

Wipe away all tears,
For the dawn draws near,
And the world is about to turn.

Kathleen Norris writes: "...hope has an astonishing resilience and strength. Its very persistence in our hearts indicates that it is not a tonic for wishful thinkers but the ground on which realists stand." There is that realistic hope again. It is like incarnation itself, God's promise come to us in human form, flesh and blood. And not only that, it comes to us via this young woman, to whom we can ascribe many qualities. The best quality is the most obvious, human.

The hope she carries within her, in hope, hope as a person carried by a person, will not erase bad things. But this hope will remind us that bad things are not the final answer. That is true of each one of us; it is true for the church which struggles in each generation to embrace hope's boldness; and it is true for the world. Especially the world, perhaps.

More and more scholars are helping us to understand the truly political nature of this hope. The empire into which Jesus was born. The flow of power and money and influence his birth disrupted. The clash of allegiances he catalyzed. Remember that this baby was born where he was because of a census, decreed by an emperor, a political act driven by financial needs.

This would not have been surprising to Mary, or Joseph. They knew their prophets, Isaiah in particular, and were familiar with the words we just heard – about one born who will refuse evil and choose good, and who will judge not only the religious establishment, but the political one as well. Mary reminds us that this hope will look like justice, and it will have far-reaching implications.

From the halls of power to the fortress tower,
not a stone will be left on stone.
Let the king beware for your justice tears
every tyrant from his throne.
The hungry poor shall weep no more,
for the food they can never earn;
These are tables spread, every mouth be fed,
for the world is about to turn.

Refrain:

My heart shall sing of the day you bring.
Let the fires of your justice burn.
Wipe away all tears,
For the dawn draws near,
And the world is about to turn.

Hope, Nicholas Adams writes, is a “learning to look forward, confident in the memory of what God has already achieved in Jesus Christ...It is not gained as a result of looking around in the world for unambiguous grounds for optimism. It is learned by understanding the partiality of all our current seeing and knowing, and by anticipating the fullness of our life in God that is yet to come...Christian hope is characterized,” Adams concludes, “by an awareness that human knowing is unavoidably provisional and that faith in God is, partly, a trust that what God will make possible is not constrained by what women and men are able to imagine or plan.” (*The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, page 309)

That is why Advent is so important as a time to prepare, to fortify our hope in imagination and memory. And it is why, at the end of this season of waiting, because of this memory, we are embedded so powerfully in the Mary story. In so many ways, she is us. When all sorts of political and religious and personal chaos is swirling about her, she is at peace, because she remembers. We are called to remember as well.

*Though the nations rage from age to age,
we remember who holds us fast:
God's mercy must deliver us
from the conqueror's crushing grasp.
This saving word that our forebears heard
is the promise which holds us bound,
Till the spear and rod can be crushed by God,
who is turning the world around.*

Refrain:

My heart shall sing of the day you bring.
Let the fires of your justice burn.

Wipe away all tears,
For the dawn draws near,
And the world is about to turn.

The dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn. It is Mary's song. We appropriate it and claim it as our song. We sing, with imagination, in hope, because of this memory. We sing in hope in the face of all evidence, in the face of every headline, with our eyes wide open to reality. We hope in God's future, Moltmann writes, in a world not yet finished, a world of possibilities. (page 338)

Gabriel's promise to Mary makes that hope real, and Mary's courageous embrace of her vocation, and the vision that magnifies God's mercy, invites our own hearts to sing our version of her song some two millennia later. That is why we are here. To rehearse. To claim the memory. To take our part and play our role in this cosmic and very realistic drama, steeped in hope.

Frederick Buechner wrote that "What keeps the wild hope of Christmas alive year after year in a world notorious of dashing all hopes is the haunting dream that the child who was born that day may yet be born again even in us." Born even in us. Born even in this world. Born even now. Wild hope. Remembered hope. Resilient hope. Realistic hope. Reconciling hope. It perches in our soul and it never stops at all, and it draws near. Amen.

ⁱ Rory Cooney, "My Soul Cries Out with a Joyful Shout (Canticle of the Turning)," 1990, *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal*, #100.