

A People of Hope
The First Sunday of Advent
December 3, In the Year of Our LORD, 2006
Gates Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Ralph S. English

Psalm 25:1-10, Jeremiah 33:14-16 and Luke 21:25-36

A new church year. *Another* new church year. With the onset of the season of Advent, we start the cycle all over. Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, - around and around we go – ever driven by the promises of God, encouraged by the fellowship of Christ’s church, and ever empowered by the Holy Spirit that is ours today!

At the same time if not all the time, we grapple with how so many of God’s dreams, visions and hopes for humanity are *still* not attained. Indeed, does it not seem as though the human race has, for all the progress and advancements in science, medicine and technology, for our ability to communicate instantly around the globe and reach the moon and now put robots on Mars – that as humans, called to be people of peace, grace, reconciliation, compassion, love, joy, and hope – that as humans we have achieved *what exactly?* ... Yet we are left with the word “hope” as the sign and seal of this First Sunday of Advent, the word that graces our bulletin cover, as though, no matter what has happened or will occur, we are to still hope, still yearn, ... no, still *expect* God’s wonderful and awe-inspiring will to be done.

Ever increasing sectarian conflict in Iraq, unresolved divisions in Palestine and Israel, simmering emotions on the Korean peninsula (although the peoples of North and South Korea did talk this last week about having one Olympic Team in 2008), more violence on the streets of our own cities, Russian political enemies dying of radioactive poisoning, a reminder this weekend of how HIV and AIDS continue to spread (and how among all who suffer are far too many innocents), the news this last week that 7 million of our country’s population are either in prison or on parole, another public display of bigotry – this time by Michael Richards of Seinfeld fame, an ever increasing gap between the very rich and the so very poor in this nation and around the world, ... to which we would add our own silent reflections on times we have experienced ill will, bitter words, ... and we are to still, no, we are determined to still have hope?

To name the “elephant in the room,” Advent and Christmas, for all the words if not hype about this being a time of giving and receiving of gifts, “holiday spirit,” family, peace, love, good tidings, ... and in the context of our Advent theme of “Joy and Triumph” ... and as much as all of those good things are true for some persons, for all too many people, this season is, at first blush, anything but that! There are those who miss loved ones, either because they are no longer with us, have died and are with God, or because they are separated by all too many miles if not by distances of the heart and soul caused by broken relationships, bitter or unkind words, or sins of commission and omission, all that we do wrong and all that we could do but fail to do.

The latest cinematic production and presentation of the birth of Jesus, “The Nativity Story,” that stars Keisha Castle-Hughes of “Whale Rider” fame, receives high accolades for the reality of the times it presents on the big screen. Sally and I saw the movie last night at the theater across the street and the film reminds us of all that Joseph and Mary experienced. Two very good aspects to the movie is how it tells the story of Joseph and how Mary and he failed to convince the

townsfolk of Nazareth that Mary had conceived her son by the Holy Spirit. (In a twist of irony, since the filming, the 16 year old, the unmarried actress that plays Mary, conceived the “old-fashioned way” – with her boyfriend.)

“The Nativity Story” does a very good job of depicting Galilee and Judea, Nazareth, Jerusalem and Bethlehem and the hardships of the times in good detail. This was an occupied land, a dirty and dusty land, travel was not easy, and Joseph’s frustration that there was “no room in the inn,” is displayed well. For those who intend to go and see the movie, I suggest a reading of the first two chapters of the Gospels of Luke and Matthew (you can skip the first seventeen verses from Matthew 1 to which I referred in this month’s Harbinger article, the forty-two generations from David to Jesus). In so reading, you will understand the significance of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the birth of their son, John, and so you will see how for the most part, “The Nativity Story” sticks to the text, and how in some other ways, it compresses a number of events into a shorter time frame than the Gospels suggest.

Most compelling for me was how at the start of the movie, the directors chose to use the words of prophecy from Jeremiah as is our reading for today. Albeit they chose the same words as found in the 23rd chapter of Jeremiah’s book, we were reminded of those promises of God, the first words of which are:

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

To paint the first Christmas as though it were an idyllic time, a seemingly, defined in human terms, “ideal time” to share and experience God’s gifts of love, faith, grace, peace, joy, triumph, reconciliation, and yes, hope – is just plain wrong. If there is a single and overriding point to the seasons of Advent and Christmas it is that for God, the “ideal time” is “all times,” and that God enters our world in times like these – times that could correctly if not more readily be defined by hurt, despair, loneliness of the spirit, division, hungers of the body and soul, political, social and military oppression, civil strife, ...

The good news of Jesus Christ is that in the promise, fulfillment, birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection and reign of our LORD, we embrace the fact that we might and can find Christ in the midst of crisis if not the mundane. Indeed, it is often *in* times of strife and loss that people have expressed the promises of faith with the greatest poignancy. Certainly the quotes from Anne Frank’s Diary, as written in the Netherlands during the Second World War when she and her family, as Jews, hid from the Nazis – who in the end, found them and sent them packing to concentration camps – are particularly significant. In the context of the Holocaust as the epitome of humanity’s inhumanity, listen to these lines from a young girl who lived *every* day of her teenage years in fear of being discovered:

- In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart.
- Think of all the beauty still left around you and be happy.
- I don’t think of all the misery, but of all the beauty that still remains.
- How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.

I had just re-read those lines from Anne Franks’ Diary and reflected on the traditions of Judeo-Christianity that young lady and we share when I read the article in the LeMoyné College

Magazine about five of its alumni one of whom is a member of this congregation, Sheila Stewart Roche. With Ms. Frank's words as a backdrop, hear these words – as printed in our worship notes, but said in the context of how in the most dire of circumstances, we might find the light of Christ, the beacon of Christ, the promise of Christ as articulated in the season of Advent, fulfilled in Christmas and then lived out in what we say and what we do as sisters and brothers of faith. Sheila writes:

I feel my efforts contribute to the safety of Afghan people, soldiers with whom I serve, loved ones at home, and nations around the world. ... I am continuously impressed with the integrity and respect shown by my colleagues toward Afghan people. And I have gained a greater understanding and appreciation for the Afghan people and their culture.

The Magazine's editors saved the most important sentence for last. It is a message that rings clear in this Advent season as a beacon to all of us who, no matter what, would find love, grace, faith, reconciliation, redemption, forgiveness, family, hope – and peace – in this so troubled world. In the context of being in a war-torn country, Sheila professes,

I have faith that peace is possible.

James Poniewozik, an editorialist and commentator for TIME magazine, reflected in last week's edition on the bigoted tirades of Mel Gibson against Jews and of Michael Richards who, standing in a comedy club, not only used the "n" word in a confrontation with African-American hecklers, but also joked about lynchings. Some of Mr. Poniewozik's editorial:

You'd think this explosion of public ugliness might spur some kind of national soul searching. Did we somehow encourage their bigotry, by ignoring softer forms of it in our pop culture? Did they think on some level, conscious or not, that they spoke for us? ...

There is the risk, of course, that we let the racist off the hook by asking what his words say about ourselves. Richards seemed to be going for that onstage: "It shocks you, to see what's buried beneath you!" Yet he was not entirely wrong – there is ugliness buried in people – and it's our responsibility as culture consumers to ask where he might be right. Some people swore off *Seinfeld* reruns after Richards' explosion. I say watch them again, and think about how the comically ugly characters reflect him, and you.

My response is that in this season of Advent, we will discover once again what lies in the depths of our souls. Given a choice between that to which Anne Frank and Sheila Stewart Roche point, that "people are really good at heart" and that "peace is possible" and that to which Mel Gibson and Michael Richards embrace, that at our core we are ugly, bigoted and sinful – the choice is clear. We choose blessing over curse, life over that which kills, and hope over despair and fear that leads to prejudice and hatred.

The star on the front of this Sunday's worship bulletin – the star of Bethlehem that gleamed long ago and would gleam in our hearts and minds today – the promise of hope that is implicit in that star – that promise is not far off! The fulfillment of that promise is near, as near as we would have it be, as near and as close as we would have it direct our thoughts, our prayers, our dreams – direct us through the harder if not harsher realities of our lives and point us to the dreams and visions and hopes that are ours of God.!

Amen.