

The World is With Child

John 1:1, 4-5, 9-13; Galatians 4:19; Romans 8: 18-21; I John 3:1

“The world is with child.” That’s how Frederick Buechner describes the Annunciation, the angel’s invitation and Mary’s yes. And tonight that child is born.

I

The Apostle Paul wrote of the two Christmas miracles, the first, when Christ was born into the world. And the second, when Christ is born in us.

“My dear children”, he wrote to the Galatians, “I am in the labor pains of childbirth until Christ be born in you.”

He was talking about *Christ in us*, however the mystery of that may happen. It happened to Paul, and was forever his song.

Catherine Doherty was a Russian baroness who was married to a Russian Aristocrat. They fled during the Russian Revolution. She found refuge in Canada and set up Friendship Houses for the poor, then moved to America, where she set up Friendship Houses in New York City, Chicago and Washington D.C. Her most famous book is *Poustinia: Encountering God in Silence, Solitude and Prayer*. All three—silence, solitude and prayer—are especially difficult in the Christmas

Season!! *Poustinia* is the Russian word for *desert*. And she wrote about how we can create and carry with us a *poustinia*, a desert within, and carry it with us where we can receive Christ's presence. I wonder as I wander.

One might say that on Christmas our inner lives become womb-like. We become empty like a cup for grace to be poured. We take on the courage of the unknown and love of the life within as we carry Christ to birth.

Christ's words can dwell in us. His presence can abide in us and with us, and in these moments we feel more than ourselves—or most ourselves.

But the miracle is not only that Christ can be *in us*, but we can be *in Christ*. We enter into Christ and into the vast realm of justice, joy, love and peace that Jesus called the kingdom of God. We are invited to enter that realm which encircles the world and is its deepest reality.

II

But there is even more. Paul saw this birthing as the birthing of a new humanity and new world! Yes, the world is with child and a new world is on its way to us and to all. “The whole creation is in labor pain until now”, Paul exclaimed. (Romans 8:22)

Paul wrote, “For I consider that the sufferings of this world are not worth comparing to the glory that is to be revealed to us.” We know well the sufferings

of this world, personal suffering, community suffering, the terrible casualties of war. Tonight Bethlehem, the town of Jesus' birth, cannot celebrate Christmas Eve as always before. Bethlehem is not far from Jerusalem, but one has to go through an armed checkpoint with heavy barbed wire fencing to get there and to travel to Jerusalem from Bethlehem. Today, Bethlehem's population is mainly made up of Jews, Muslims, and an increasingly small number of Palestinian Christians. Their festivities are subdued this Christmas Eve as they grieve and pray for their brothers and sisters in Gaza.

One Lutheran church there has set up its creche and placed it in a rubble of crushed stones and concrete. The baby Jesus wears a Palestinian scarf as its swaddling clothes. This year, the Christ of the rubble.

Yes, the sufferings of the world are our daily experience.

But Paul says these sufferings cannot be compared to the glory to be revealed to us. And not just in the world to come but to this world, our world, "on earth as in heaven", as Jesus taught us to pray.

"For creation waits in eager longing for the revealing of the sons and daughters of God", Paul writes.

That's it. That's us , that's the world, this night, waiting in eager longing.

For creation itself will be set free from decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God.

Come, glorious liberty, come.

Hear again how the writer of 1 John tells the wonder of Christmas:

See what love God has given us—love as if from another country—that we should be called children of God. And indeed we are.

All of us.

In the moment that ends our service tonight, we will join in a circle with our lighted candles and see the glowing faces of each other, and see who we really are, the children of God.

III

The night of Christ's birth is adorned in light. As John began his gospel, he looked to the Christ to come:

In him was life and the life was the light to all. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

Every Christmas eve we hope in these words, perhaps never more so than this year. *There is a light the darkness cannot and will not put out.*

The true light, light that enlightens everyone was coming into the world.

John wrote

He was in the world, and the world was made through him yet the world knew him not.

This seems ever so. But, John writes:

But to all who received him, who believed in his name he gave power to become children of God.

Bring that holy power and holy light tonight, O God.

IV

And now we bear that light to the world. One of America's greatest writers, the black author James Baldwin, wrote:

The longer I live, the more deeply I learn that love—whether friendship or family or romantic—is the work of mirroring and magnifying each other's light.

Such is the holy work of Christmas, to mirror and magnify each other's light.

I think Rabbi Judy Schindler told us this old rabbinic story:

A rabbi asked his students “How can we determine the hour of dawn, when the night ends and the day begins?”

One student raised his hand and replied, “When dawn comes you can distinguish at a distance between a dog and a sheep.”

The rabbi shook his head no.

Another student replied, “You know the dawn comes when you can distinguish between a fig tree and a grape vine.”

“No”, the rabbi said.

“Then when?” the students asked.

The rabbi said, “When you look into the face of human beings and you have enough light in you to recognize them as your brothers and sisters, then the dawn has come.”

Now the holy light has come and we behold each other and all people as brothers and sisters and children of God.

May this light dwell in us that we may carry it into the night and the breaking day of Christmas.

Here is a lyric from a contemporary Christmas cantata:

All is well, all is well

Angels and men rejoice

For tonight, darkness fell

into the dawn of love's light.

Sing Ale,

Sing Alleluia!¹

Amen

1. "All is Well", Michael W. Smith/ Wayne Kirkpatrick