

## Advent 4 C

## Luke 1:39-49

Now the Fourth Sunday of Advent has always, for me, pointed to an unresolved tension in Christianity. It may be a tension which resolves, somewhat, as one verges toward sainthood. Not having a habit of verging in that direction, I can't claim to know for sure. The lessons announce the coming of a God who changes the world and changes it radically. In fact, the words used are not just words of change, but of revolution – casting down the mighty, exalting the lowly. Yet as I look around, I'm not sure, at least in our history and institutional and social life, that change in a Godward direction is apparent. There are the poor still poor and the humble still preyed upon by the powerful and human existence still shot through with incomprehension, malice, defensiveness, exploitation. Then the question comes, rising from the tension between the announcement of change and its apparent lack, are we just fooling ourselves with all this moving music and all this hoopla about the significance of the coming of this child? Are we fooling ourselves?

There's a rather simple response frequently proposed to this conundrum, and, like most simple responses, it takes us only a percentage of the distance we need to travel. But let's begin, then, with thinking about what it would have been like without the coming of the child. One can point to all sorts of things that would have been different – and worse. The unfortunate facet of this argument is that one can also point to things which seem worse because of the coming. An explanation and example may be in order.

The evil in the human heart, and I'm asserting this without proof, will generally seize that which is closest to God to justify itself. Think about the medieval crusades: a tendency toward unbridled massive aggression, coupled with horrible expressions of prejudice against Jews and Moslems, and justified by appealing to the coming of the child and to control of the place in which the child came. It's that kind of thing I mean. Something a bit closer to home: the tendency toward the subjugation of women in this culture has been justified for years, and still is, by appeal to scripture. The worst in the human heart, appealing to that which is closest to God, to justify its evil.

And yet there is something else going on. In appealing to that which is closest to God to justify evil, there is a back handed acknowledgment of the power which infuses the good, otherwise it would not be attractive to so misuse it.

People waste a great deal time and effort, at least it seems wasted to me, looking around for something in this world which refers to God and is yet, in and of itself, pure, holy and incorruptible. We will not find it. We will never find it. Everything which points to God can also be used to point in the opposite direction. Scripture can certainly be used to point away from God as well as to God. It may even be used with a more deadly subtlety to point to an understanding of God which is unworthy of God's reality. I do not care which holy book it is – the Bible, the Torah, the Koran, the Dhammapada, the Bagavad-gita, it can point away from its creator's intension as well as towards it. A good deal of what it means to be Christian is to exemplify that humility which looks inside oneself for one's personal use of holy things to point away from God. How do you and I do that? If my practice of Christianity does not consider the possibility that I am pointing away from God even in my attempts to explain scripture to you and to represent Christ in the Eucharist on your behalf, my Christianity is defective. The possibility of misusing the holy is a constant companion of the church's life.

If communities of Christians cannot seriously consider this as a possibility of their communal life, then their communal Christianity is defective.

When we talk of pulling down the mighty and taking tyrants from their thrones, we need to talk about it happening in the heart as it happens in the world. The failure of more reform movements than I care to count rests in seeing the enemy as external only. As we struggle with both internal and external tyranny, the complexity of human behavior becomes more and more apparent. The question is, first, “Are we moving in a proper direction?” I think about this in terms of mountain climbing. In climbing there are frequently several different ways to get to the top. Some people like to climb ridges, some, who are more masochistic in their personalities, prefer gullies. (Additional rockfall to dodge.) Some routes are long and gentle, some are shorter and steeper. So there are different ways to get where one is going.

But what do I hear: there is one true way and God has a plan for your life. By which, I am afraid, is usually meant that there is a single plan. I rather doubt that. God’s presence, if one believes the Old Testament at all, is marked by dialogue which results in change. The Old Testament is littered with divine-human conversations, and the human beings show no inclination to just shut up and listen. Sometimes those conversations are quite peculiar. Abraham bargains with God, saying, “Well, Lord, most powerful and holy . . .” and so forth, “What will you do if you find ninety righteous in the city? Will you destroy the city?” and then eighty and then seventy and so forth. This is a near perfect example Near-Eastern market bargaining. Abraham bargains God down. Yes, but the key thing is it’s a conversation. At the other end of the Old Testament, there is Jeremiah complaining bitterly to God about how God has treated him. He says, If I had known what it was going to be like, I’d have shut my ears. But even in rejection and anger and regret the conversation goes on.

So the key thing is not the one way or a specific path marked out the same for all, but to be in a conversation within which we discover the ability to shape our direction Godwardly. Not to assume that there is just one way and when found it is found. That just isn’t the case. But if we are blocked in one place from doing God’s will, then God, in the flexibility which marks true perfection, offers another.

Again, look to the Old Testament. There you see a long history of God offering to human beings modes of existence and relating to him which don’t work. First, it’s the Garden of Eden, from which humans are expelled. Then it’s the covenant with Abraham, and that doesn’t do the job, and then the giving of the law through Moses, and that works none too well. Then there are all those prophets, only partially listened to. If God were like us, he would have stopped trying part way through the process. But every human failure provokes from God a rekindling of conversation. This is why the idea of covenant cannot be reduced to the notion of contract. When contracts are broken they become void. When covenants are broken, one finds another way of living them out. Or at least God does.

What does all this have to do with today’s difficult language of Christ’s coming overthrowing the mighty? Part of what it means to be truly human is to hope. Sometimes, I think, that of the three cardinal virtues: faith, hope and love, hope gets the rear seat. We expect our obedience to God, whatever variation on “the one true way” we’ve discovered, to be sufficient for us. Therefore our faith, the guarantor that the way we have been given is the way, tends to become the most important thing. I’d encourage us to think of hope as key, hope which opens us wide to the beginnings of a new conversation with God when an old one hasn’t worked. If one’s faith, whatever form that takes, doesn’t work, (and no faith that a human being can hold will ultimately work) then it is hope which allows the conversation to begin anew. It is not faith, which can turn to ashes. Even love needs a vehicle for its expression. Love needs a body to express it, but it also needs a conversation within which it can be exchanged. Therefore the ability to begin that conversation which forms the

framework of love, the ability to begin it again is of immense importance in the Christian life.

Oddly enough, while in today's gospel preparation for the coming of Jesus is emphasized, the collect of the day suggests a counterpoint to the gospel. "Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, . . ." (The Book of Common Prayer, Collect of Advent 4 p. 212) And daily visitation balances the one coming in Bethlehem. Part of the trick of Christianity is to understand the "once and for all" historical event as the origin of daily events. The ultimate and final expression of any form of tyranny is when it gains power to shape our inner lives, so that we are convinced of the truth of that which tyrannizes over us. In the case of abusive relationships, the abused frequently asks, "What did I do to cause him/her to act violently? It must be my fault that I am under tyranny, what have I done?" The foundational step in the breaking of any tyranny is for it to lose the power to make us who we are. That is what the coming of Christ, either in Palestine 2000 years ago or in today's visitation, does. The first step in realizing the Magnificat, is to receive as central something other than whatever tyranny the world has to offer. The Magnificat promises another foundation upon which to rest our being. Now, to expect the world to become different without having us become different is an odd expectation. The point remains valid: without the confrontation of inner tyranny, there will be no effective confrontation of external tyrannies. There will only be the substitution of one salvation fad for another.

Now, don't think I'm substituting an inner or even autonomous ethic for an outer, other directed and social one. All I'm pointing out is that, if the inner life does not mesh with the outer expression, then we have the situation Jesus calls hypocrisy. He didn't like it. So somehow, the unity and oneness of God call to us to create a similar kind of unity in ourselves, so that who we are on the inside and how we express ourselves towards the world mesh. One reason for this is because when God saves us, he saves the whole shebang, not just the inside or the outside. But the whole of us. But God cannot save that which is not, somehow, trying to look towards him. One needn't know that that's what one is doing. Self-consciousness of God is not a requirement for salvation. I've known a number of people who have loved God but didn't know that's what they were doing.

So in saving us, God doesn't save us piecemeal. That's why it's important that the inside and outside of our existence form a single whole. And the salvation of God is the foundation of our existence on what he has to offer, not what the world offers. There is no promise that everything will be OK. Just a promise that for those whose lives are founded on God's love, God's love cannot be shaken.

Now, I realize that I haven't answered the question with which I began. Nor did I really expect to. But I've been trying.

Please stand for the Creed.