



Richmond Hill Reflections

“Waiting for the Dawn” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

December 22, 2019; Fourth Sunday of Advent

Reading: Luke 1:26-38; Matthew 1:18-25

December is dark. January lacks daylight but doesn't feel as heavy as December. I think it's because in January you know the days are getting longer. But in December each day just gets darker. We've experienced this liturgically as well in our look at Jesus' genealogy. It's made for an atypical Advent as we looked head on at shadowed aspects of our world. This isn't easy to do at the best of times but especially difficult as we head to Christmas. Our cultural focus is light - twinkling lights, flickering candles, crackling fires - largely because the nights are so long. Thank you for going along with my idea. When I first proposed it, I didn't think exploring Jesus' ancestry would take such a dark turn.

Yet I shouldn't have been surprised. The biblical story isn't sweet like a Christmas card. Jesus is born in an oppressive empire. A census has one purpose: to raise taxes. Mary names the injustice they experience when she visits Elizabeth: the rich and powerful are in control. And that's just Luke's gospel. Matthew's is more challenging with magi enquiring of Jesus' birth and tipping an already paranoid ruler over the edge, unleashing murderous anger. Not many carols about that.

Fortunately, just as December's lengthening nights lead us to solstice and the promise of longer days again, the Christmas story points to victory. Angels appear in glory to tell the shepherds a saviour's been born. A star appears in the sky; as Gentiles come to honour Jesus, we're called to become one family. This is the tone of the annunciation stories. When Gabriel appears to Mary, or alternatively to Joseph, the fundamental message is the same – a holy birth is coming. The child is of divine origin and purpose – to free us from the hurt and harm that defines so much of human relationships. Jesus, meaning “G-d saves”, will redeem us, returning love and justice to the centre of who we are to be and making peace the foundation of how we relate to one another.

He “saves” because through him people experience “Emmanuel”. This revealing of G-d-with-us is fundamental to redemption. So much harm takes place in the world because we feel alienated from ourselves and each other. We falsely feel separate and alone, fallen. Spiritually this is our focus. At times we place more emphasis on the story of an angelic light bearer who falls from heaven than on the human child revealed as “light of the world”. We act like our light has been lost and succumb to

more selfish tendencies. We end up becoming paralyzed in the face of the shadowed realities of our world, unable to do anything to confront them. Yet Jesus coming as “light of the world” reveals that divine light has always been here (*point to self*), and here (*point to congregation*), and all around us. In Jesus we’re reminded how the gift of divine light and blessing is always present, G-d always close, dwelling within and holding us together in love.

When we see this, we rediscover who we’ve always been – the hands and feet and voice of G-d, commissioned as co-creators with G-d to restore balance to the world. What is essential to both stories is how the redemptive purpose only comes through Mary’s and Joseph’s yes. We hesitate to give our “yes”, believing that Mary and Joseph were somehow purer, more perfect than any of us, but is that what the story tells us? Both Mary and Joseph are confused by Gabriel’s message. How can Mary bear a “saving” child into the world if she and Joseph aren’t married yet? In both gospels it’s clear Joseph is not the father. We resolve it with a miracle because we don’t want to think of the alternative, in spite of what Mark’s gospel suggests. But why can’t a Jesus with a suspect conception be a vehicle of G-d’s grace and blessing? This to me is a more powerful storyline. It highlights that moments of light and blessing can arise despite the shadowy realities of our world. It uplifts Joseph too, given how he raises Jesus as his in these circumstances, knowing he’ll be rejected for accepting such a dishonour. Like Joseph and Mary, we don’t need to be pure or wait for perfect circumstances to bear light and grace into the world. We just need to bring love wherever we see hurt and harm.

Thankfully we do just that - contributing to a toy drive, topping up year end givings to charities, creating space for those grieving over the holidays, facilitating a festive meal for clients of the Krasman Centre, ensuring a child’s school day begins with a full stomach, doing what we can to lower GHG emissions, enhancing Sunday worship with song... In as many ways as there are people in this sanctuary, light is being shared, each person bringing about the dawn we yearn for.

Our Advent began a bit dark, but dawn doesn’t come unless we have gone through the night. May we come to Christmas, our celebration of the birth of Jesus as “light of the world”, knowing we too are that gift of light in the darkness. Together, through the gift of G-d’s light in each of us, we are the sun slowly rising. We needn’t wait for the dawn. We’re creating it together. Amen.