

THE INWARD ARC
CHRIST CONCEIVED

Texts on Sunday, December 23, 2012

Luke 1: 26-55

As the Christian church sings the ancient song of the promised child this season, how hard must be the work of words in Newtown, Connecticut. There, for hundreds—or shall we say thousands? shall we say all who are paying attention?—some promised child is no longer in promise. There, long before they sang joy to the world, Rachel is already weeping for her children. Can the preachers pound out Elizabeth's greeting—*Blessed is the fruit of your womb?* To parents in pews whose babies were buried from the very place just days ago, can they sweetly sing Mary's song of praise—*My soul rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant?*

I hope not. I mean this. I hope no pastor thinks that repeating the old promises is the lullaby needed now. I hope no one, from pulpit to pew, patly pushes Jesus as the "reason for the season" or suggests in any way that it is Christian religion which holds the true answer for this evil. If you have ever gazed all but endlessly into a fire, quiet of thought; if you remember the sacred connection when looking long, without desire or dread or thought on the face of an infant, so look now, absent arguments, into the fires of sorrow at Christmas.

Remember that the promised Christ child would not be remembered on any account at all, except that he too was murdered with gruesome intent. Dreams of White Christmas notwithstanding, there was never meant to be a pretty path into the promise of God's son. Christ was not conceived that way. If we step back from holiday cheer long enough to feel how impossible the season must seem for some of our neighbors a little north of here, our eyes will open enough to see more: the sorrow of mothers and fathers of gun-dead children all over this city, of Ramarley Graham and unnamed thousands more—of Trayvon Martin, of Jordan Davis,. All over Syria and Iraq and Afghanistan and Mexico, we will see, and our mind will rear like a horse unable to cross the bridge to see so much violence. The vessel of our heart is not shaped for hundreds and thousands of sorrows. Our aim now is not to try to feel more than we can, nor to feel small for having felt so great compassion for just Sandy Hook. Our aim is rather that the shock of sorrow and the sense of solidarity with those whose grief is great might strip away our preconceptions of Christ's coming, so that Christ might come.

"A virgin," wrote Meister Eckhart eight hundred years ago, "is a person

free of irrelevant ideas, as free as he was before he existed . . . exempt from idea-handicaps." Preconceptions are contraceptions of Christ, we might say. Preconceptions prevent Christ's coming. If we are to bear the costly fruit, first we must become a virgin, as Meister Eckhart meant *virgin*.

The ways to remove our preconceptions are many. Our traditions help with waymarks to guide. The *via doloroso*, the path of sorrow, is one way. If one finds herself becoming free along its shadowed path, it comes to this, that the God one imagined does not show up, does not move a finger to keep the dreaded thing from happening, does not explain why the world works this way, and still does not show up. God is "no call/no show," as employers say, when a hired hand is soon to be fired. So with the god of our imagination, when he has *not* shown strength with his arm. Is it God who thus scatters the imagination of our hearts? People sometimes say that on this road "I lost my faith." More straightforward would be: "There, I lost my certitude, I lost my preconceptions." For many, in just this way, the path of faith is at last prepared and Christ can finally be conceived.

Here is another way. In the fall of 2008, I spent three weeks working in the precincts of Cleveland to help tip Ohio's vote for Mr. Obama. On election night, hundreds of workers were gathered at the campaign headquarters. As the returns turned into decision, we saw something to which I had never been witness and which I do not expect I will ever see again. I call it "authentic public joy." Now, sports joy is public, and loud and fun, but its source is shallow, unlike authentic public joy. The end of a great war must have brought such joy, but I never saw the end of a great war. Emancipation from slavery must have brought such joy, but we did not live then. There in Cleveland, every face and voice joined in disbelieving shouts of joy and every giant embrace seemed to carry us forward in one meaning, one hope.

But whoever has eyes to see knows that the occasion of public is joy not for all, but only for some. All flesh does not see it together, and it does not last. All flesh does see the night of war together, especially when great nations pour war down on weak ones. And all flesh does together see the days of storm and quake and raging seas and murderous mayhem on TVs. But we never see a great good thing together.

Yet that is precisely what our great holy days claim to mark. Christmas and Easter and the Passover of our Jewish sisters and brothers are given as signs that God "showed strength with his arm" and, goes the story, all flesh saw it together. But not anymore. As Leonard Cohen put in a song: ♪ *There was a time when you let me know / What's really going on below / But now you never show it to me, do you?* Whatever joys we felt in moments of partisan success, we know they are not God's moment when all falls apart in

disillusionment. The end of the Mayan calendar brought nothing new. The millions of Christians hoping that more war in the Middle East will mean Christ is coming bring nothing more than war to the world. Christ cannot conceivably come to a world so pregnant with preconceptions! Christmas itself remains a hollow holiday—until disillusionment removes our illusions of hope for total solutions, and we cease imagining that all flesh should see exactly what we hope to see. Then we can start to see the world as it is, without preconceptions. For such a world, Christ can be conceived.

Here is another way Christ comes. In yesterday's *Savannah Morning News*, the paper was reviewing highlights of 2012. One bullet point read: "The Telfair Museum took community engagement to a higher level with 'Journey to the Beloved Community: Story Quilts by Beth Mount.'" The reference is to an exhibition which my wife was able to mount in Savannah with the help of dozens of activists there. The extraordinary achievement to which the Savannah reporter referred was that in a town where people are so used to their ordinary associations and preconceptions, this show brought rich and poor, able and not-so-easily abled, Jew and Christian and no-faith-at-all, young and hip, old and organized, straight and gay, black and white and more . . . together to think and work on the future of the city and the nation.

Last September, one of the directors of the museum was speaking to a large working group related to the exhibition. He was blunt in his comments. He said he had not had much interest in the show through the planning stage, that he didn't like quilts, and hadn't time for community activism. In other words, he had been full of preconceptions. Then he said, "I came in here a Republican, but I am leaving a Democrat." Now, I don't want anyone to take offense—or take pride, for that matter. Politics are not the wings by which the dove comes down. But the wings of the dove are wings of conversion. When the powerful come down from their thrones, and the lowly are lifted up into full communion in Savannah; when the hungry are filled with good things and the needs and greeds of the rich are sent away as swiftly as that museum director abandoned his, then preconceptions are gone and conversion is at hand. The museum director used a kind of shorthand to speak of his conversion to community, his conversion to love. This is how Christ is conceived: When a person is emptied of judgments—"exempt from idea-handicaps" as Eckhart put it—and filled with beloved community.

This is certainly happening right now in Newtown, Connecticut. You have observed yourself and your fellow human beings well enough to know that for not a few there, the unspeakable acts that slashed down thousands of love lines in that horrible hurricane of homicide have also emptied them

of preconceptions and judgments upon one another, which had kept Christ from them. Now, in an empty space, at least for some, they are like virgins, ready for Holy Spirit to come upon them and overpower them in love and community. Christ can only be conceived for a world such as this.

In fact, Christ always comes in a body no one recognizes, for Christ can't be pre-conceived. In this spirit, the German novelist Thomas Mann wrote “. . . love cannot be disembodied, even in its most sanctified forms. Nor is it without sanctity even at its most fleshly. Love is our sympathy with organic life, the touchingly lustful embrace of what is destined to decay.” (*The Magic Mountain*, 1996, p. 590)

If you are hanging with our thought this morning, you will not be surprised to hear me claim that Christ is not conceived religiously. In the sovereignty of God, the Spirit has no limits. There are no constraints on God's freedom to be conceived in whomever God chooses, under whatever skins and fabrics of meaning are legible to whichever beings God communicates Godself. A Christian has no particular advantage in receiving the grace of God. We do have something important, though. All our practices and habits of the heart—holy worship, scripture, prayer and meditation, community, and even the beloved spaces in which we gather—provide no edge over others, with respect to the good will of God. All the scriptures bear witness, here and there, that our forebears felt God's absolute freedom to love, to lift up, and to save any creature whatsoever, without respect to religion, including ours. All that is particular to the Christian religion and to our Christian community serves not to secure goods from God. Rather, to establish in our hearts a hope so absolute and so free of preconceptions that we ourselves become open and transparent, able to burn as lights of the Divine to give light through the darkness to any who have not seen Light.

May you go forth into these holy days, like a virgin, free of preconceptions, ready to open a new gift, wrapped in the presence of Christ.

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in the City of New York*