

## IN THE MATRIX OF HOPE

Text for Advent Three

December 13, 2009

*Luke 1: 26-38*

The actual words, few and simple, came to me during a conversation with my very close friend John near the end of my seminary training. “Interpretation is everything.” A real insight does not drop in on our mind like a sudden seed from which the truth grows. No, almost the reverse. Real insight comes more like the last stage of work on a satisfying painting. For a long time, you are working in the medium of a new understanding, but you can’t see the whole. So when at last the new idea comes home to rest in your mind in words, it is not that the words themselves are carrying the truth as a pail carries water. Had you heard the words sooner, they would not have carried you up on eagle’s wings. No, it is rather that at last *you* were ready to become the value of your understanding. The words are coins minted from your whole prior development, neither more nor less.

Thus I came to say that in the matter of truth, interpretation is everything. After you see that, you can’t go home again. Now you are responsible for what you think, what you feel, how you act. You don’t anymore believe that you can stand before authorities and take in truth as a sunbather soaks sun. No, there’s a filter on everything you think and feel and do, and Tag! You’re It—like it or not. No more: “She makes me feel guilty . . .” Rather, “When I listen to her, I feel my guilty feelings, though often I’d rather not.” No more religion as child’s nose pressed to the window of the baby Jesus stories, wishing you could get in where believing looks easy. No, when interpretation is everything, you’re already in the scene. You see the lights and the cameras, the moving star on a crane, the bin labeled “Extra Hay” and the evangelist bent to an encyclopedia article on gift-giving practices among ancient astrologers from the East. Interpretation is everything, and you are responsible, and you can’t go home again.

So I believed and so I taught for a number of years. It seemed to me that all new knowledge was, as I used to say, “the old, bent”—meaning that learning is taking hold of something already understood, then slightly altering or bending it with a new interpretation. Seen this way, growth in understanding, like growth in a plant, happens only at the tip, bending beautifully.

But after a time, I felt a hole in my understanding. I had come to the bottom of a sorrow, bereft of trust that my own will or wisdom or words would work me up from it. Was it possible to learn something absolutely new—something not grounded in what I’d previously known? But how can this be, I asked, since I have known no other way? Yet even in the asking, an answer was seeking its voice, for I hoped that the answer was Yes. I hoped that somehow I might receive a word from beyond powers of thought. I hoped that thought might be not more than servant to a higher master.

I saw that if this were possible, the new must come into an empty space, where no knowing of my own would grab it and haul it off to one of the caves of my personality and have its way with the new. Is there something in us which has no account of itself, no story at all, neither pride nor skill nor fear nor hatred nor guilt nor sin? A place within wherein is nothing to bend and nothing to grasp. If not, then there is nothing new in this existence and we are tethered to that terrible ball of Sisyphus. But I saw that if true new may become manifest, I must first know nothing in a real, practical sense. For the new would only come into an emptiness which knew it not, and could not grasp it. Like a virgin. Like Mary.

Now, to say “like the virgin Mary” sounds like just another interpretation—a slight if sudden bending of the old story of maiden Mary and her empty womb and open self, visited by the angel. But I propose to you that Mary is much more than a metaphor. For my part, I couldn’t say whether the woman who bore Jesus of Nazareth said or did any of what we sing of her; the odds against it are long. But what we say now is beyond doubt. The story of Mary’s God-visited, open, empty, virgin soul has been handed down to you by masters of the soul as a guide. Here is the opening to a pathway you cannot find in your

self and no self-help book dares speak her way. Mary stands for hope that God's true new may come upon you, O favored one: that which you need but cannot even name, so far beyond your understanding it is; that without whose hope you are left circling in your pen of pleasures and pains, maybe nice, maybe not, but no bigger than yourself. And Mary shows how this hope comes—not by interpretation, but through an emptiness we have left untouched, prepared for God. Hope is this other way we learn. Mary is to bear you this.

Now, a caution. Hope itself has two kinds. The ordinary kind hopes that something will bring your desire to pass. This kind of hope is rooted in memory, in the past, It is not really new. Either you knew it once and want it back—health restored, reunion with a beloved, a job lost—or you have seen it and now desire it—a degree, a certain job, a Caribbean vacation, a nation at peace. It is wishing. Most prayers take this shape—and they change nothing for they strengthen the illusion that conditions must change to serve my happiness. We wait for an ordinary hope, ever conscious of time passing, sometimes certain that it will come, like a train; sometimes not, like an end to drought; sometimes patiently, sometimes not, But ordinary hope has always the same trajectory, up and down, happy and sad: *samsara* Buddhists call it. Just to utter the hope that things turn out your way carries in it an echo of fear that time and chance will shun your path, and hope will fail and you left hopeless will be.

There is another kind of hope. It is not ordinary and it comes not at the call of ordinary thought. In Mary's empty openness you hear of it, for she trusts in God though she knows not how God's good may come to her. How can this be? she asks, though she is ready for the new in emptiness which knows nothing. This is the other way we learn—not from what was or what we have seen, which are positions, but from negations of what we know, from possibility, from what can be.

In a lovely book of the same name, author Cynthia Bourgeault calls this hope *mystical hope*. It has no object and no desired outcome. Its blessing is not out there, in time, but here, now, in the graceful inward joy and assurance that all that is necessary has already been given. Words cannot give compass to the good in it. Does it sound like the attitude of a simple-minded faith, such as you, a cosmopolitan, could never wear? Then you do not yet understand. The spirit of emptiness has not landed in you like a dove. But if you hear this word, that Mary's way has more to show than you have met yet, the preparation for hope absolute has begun. Everything else we do belongs to the tiresome struggles of ordinary hope.

Certainly some in this sanctuary are hungering for this word. If you are the one, you see how your thoughts are strung out across the day, wishing this ordeal be done, hoping that sweet will may come, ever there, never here. Though this is our human condition much of the time, most Christians have been taught only to pray to wish it away. This is a tragedy, for the Christian tradition is filled with guides for paths deep beneath the fearful struggles our ego finds normal. Mary is first, in a way, for she bears you this: Learn to empty yourself of what you think you know, and you will bear Christ alive. Yeats put it this way in a poem: [from *Vacillation*]

My fiftieth year had come and gone,  
I sat, a solitary man,  
In a crowded London shop,  
An open book and empty cup  
On the marble table-top.  
While on the shop and street I gazed  
My body of a sudden blazed;  
And twenty minutes more or less  
It seemed, so great my happiness,  
That I was blessed and could bless.

What is it to empty your cup and open your book? How do you empty the womb of your creative spirit and open your mind, that God may freely move within you to bring Christ to bear? A practice is wanting. A commitment of your soul, daily, perhaps several times daily, to abandon your attachment to your longings and your fears, which are your ordinary hopes. It is the narrow way, the way of Mary. No one finds it except at need. But empty yourself—a prayer of no words is the practice long taught by our masters. Empty yourself, and God will come. “To be empty of creatures is to be full of God,” wrote Meister Eckhart. But perhaps a modern, Thomas Merton has put Mary’s way in a way for your hearing.

“God is near to us at the point just before our final destruction. Take away everything else down to that point—and the last little bit left before destruction is a little kernel of gold which is the essence of you—and there is God, protecting it . . . This is something terrific . . . The freedom that matters is to be in contact with that center.”

It is Advent. We are waiting, we are hoping. Not for Christmas Day, God knows. Not even for God to make peace on earth. That’s our job. No, Advent stands for the practice of emptying yourself of all you think and know and feel that God may bring to life in you God’s Christ. Start now.

May you be met in the matrix of hope where you accept God’s seed and conceive the absolutely new, which is God incarnate, Jesus Christ, grace of God in you.<sup>1</sup> No matter your condition, may you ready your heart to say: “Behold, the servant of the Lord. Be it done to me according to your word.”

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<sup>1</sup> “Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God’s seed abides in them.” (1 John 3:9)