

John the Baptist has Jesus in mind, of course, when he says in Matthew, “*One is coming who is more powerful than I..*” John is Jesus’ cousin. Their moms, Mary and Elizabeth, and kinsfolk.

In Luke’s gospel, Mary, pregnant with Jesus, greets Elizabeth pregnant with John, and the sound of Mary’s voice finds John leaping in the womb sensing Mary carries this more powerful one. Jesus is powerful before we even meet him. It’s so unexpected – this thing God does – coming to our wanting world – through people of little means. Why not choose a secure home? Why make this odd coming harder than it might have been?

But this is the Advent/Christmas story – God coming not just into Mary’s fragility, but into the world’s – for the sheer joy of it. Christmas takes on such hype that it’s easy to forget it’s about joy to the world, about hope for daily lives. God *comes to us, abide with us, Emanuel.*

But joy and hope seem like endangered species. Do we have the optimism to mean it when we sing carols of hope and joy to the world? Joy and hope are well represented in our carols, but are we naïve to sing them? How do we sing of hope when wars go unchecked, and many go hungry, and cynicism is expressed against BLM banners and rainbow flags hanging out church doors?

In our era, as in many previous eras, the question is asked, “Why bring children into this world?” It’s too far gone for such optimism. Pastor-poet Steve Garness-Holmes admits to his occasional brush with despair, writing this week:

“I despaired of cleaning off the driveway
of the mud and sand and gravel.
But in the night a strong storm,
and in the morning, a pristine driveway, washed clean.
How often I think the world and I are subject
to our powers alone,
when there is a greater power at work...”

Thank you, Steve. Joy and hope rise in me as I ponder this reminder of a greater power at work. And Advent gets specific. Not only is there a greater power, but this power comes infant size, laying in a manger. The hardest thing may be trusting this has everything to do with us.

How often do I, do we, like poet Steve, despair because we’re mindful only of our powerlessness in the face of what’s up? How often do we think there isn’t hope enough for the challenges of our lives, our family, our church, our country, or neighbor’s country, our fractured earth? How often do we wake up in worry more than in wonder, hope, and joy?

Today, Dec. 4, is the birthday of another poet – this one part of the so-called *dead poet’s society* - Rainer Maria Rilke. Rilke is famous in Prague, where he was born in 1875. If we’ve heard of him, it may be from his *Letters to a Young Poet* where he famously wrote:

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and books written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. The point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

This is where the Advent Season calls us to place our hope – in loving the questions that arise if we let them – questions like “Where will we meet the Christ child coming to birth today? How can we be mangers for this holy birth?” To love questions like these is the work of Christmas.

What curiosity or even excitement might start up if we truly believe Christ needs who we are – our gifts, our resources, our willingness to make a difference? – that the unborn Child is on the lookout for the likes of you so a holy presence can take on flesh – through your efforts, your love, your service, your yearning for good to happen?

One of the carols I love singing at Christmas and keep singing the whole 12 day season is *O Little Town of Bethlehem*. It includes, *O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray, be born in us today*. That has long been a favorite Christmas prayer – right there in a beloved carol.

Which are your favorite carols? Tell us so we can sing them in the next several weeks. Write one or two on a card in the pew racks. On Zoom, write in the chat.

Real physical births aren't done easily in isolation. Birthing begs for loving support and attentive cheering squads and helpful resources. I was grateful for the care surrounding me as my babies came to birth. And I've come to see God isn't all that different in this coming called Christmas.

15th century Christian mystic Meister Eckhart wrote, “God is eternally on the maternity bed giving birth.” You and I are invited to be God's cheering squad and support team for this holy birthing. It seems crazy, but this is Christmas – God coming to birth in the lowly mangers of us.

Carol read Romans 15 as today's Epistle, “By the steadfastness and encouragement of the scriptures, we have hope.” Paul doesn't speak of hope as an ethereal feeling but hope as God's concrete coming into our complex lives. God's Word stirs to life in the peculiarities of our talents, our time, our treasure. It sounds audacious, but Christmas is God coming to bring peace and joy and hope to the world through us.

There's a voice in the wilderness crying, prepare a way – become a way for God's coming. Make ready a place where our God, our God may go. Love the questions that arise about how you can best make ready. Christmas comes soon.

Amen

+*Pastor Peg, LCM, LA*