

Hoping in the Dark
II Samuel 7:1-16
Luke 1:26-38

“Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.”

“When we reach our limits, when our ordered worlds collapse, when we cannot enact our moral ideals, when we are disenchanted, we often enter into an awareness of Mystery...” theologian John Shea writes. “Our dwelling within Mystery is both menacing and promising, a relationship of exceeding darkness and undeserved light. In this situation [and] with this awareness we do a distinctively human thing. We gather together and tell stories of God to calm our terror and hold our hope on high.”

Two such stories are before us this morning. The first is told by exiles in Babylon. It is a story about a time, centuries before, when, in the middle of the night, God woke the prophet Nathan and told him to tell David, “Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.” At first it sounds like the sort of story people tell, when things are falling apart, to remind themselves of the “good old days,” days when you were confident your children’s lives would be better than your own, when there was a “can do” attitude in the land, when even the sky was not the limit.

The good old days for Judah and Israel were when David was on the throne, the land secured from enemies, and God’s favor evident. Whether in gratitude for his good fortune or in order to guarantee God’s future favor, David decides to build a house for God. It is what we do with God when things are going well and the world is ours to remake in our own image. We find a way to put God in God’s place. But through the prophet Nathan, God rejects David’s offer and reasserts his nomadic identity, his preference for a tent untethered to place. Remember that this story is first told by a people with no temple, no land and no king, told in a

time when God was, of all missing persons, the most missed. Surely the beginning of this story gave God's people hope in the darkness of exile: hope that the destruction of the temple did not mean God had abandoned them forever.

Then as if to turn the tables eternally, God promises David a house (a dynasty); promises David's son that he will never remove his steadfast love from him; and declares that David's house and kingdom shall be made sure forever. The story is a story told on the knife edge of hope and hopelessness. It is, according to Walter Brueggemann, the most important story in the whole of Hebrew Scripture, presenting the people who walked in darkness with an astonishing assurance of God's steadfast love and mercy; but also presenting them with an unnerving choice: the choice to live in hope **or** despair; to look *not* at things seen, but at things unseen **or** to throw in with the Babylonians and with what human enterprise in the service of empire could do; to wait and watch for the humanly inconceivable thing God would yet do **or** to give up on God altogether. When the exile finally ended and a Gentile king sent God's people back to Judah in 537 B.C., only a remnant returned to the land, rebuilt the temple and continued under occupation to hope for the promised reign of a king from David's house.

Enter the angel Gabriel and a virgin betrothed to a man who was from the house and lineage of David. Luke wrote this story some seventy years after Jesus' birth and a decade or more after the destruction of the temple. Likely he was writing to a fledgling community of Gentile and Jewish followers of Jesus living in Rome under the rule of Domitian, an emperor whose persecution of Jews and Christians in the early 90's would prompt the writing of the Book of Revelation. The story concerns the child Mary would bear in her womb, a child so great that he was humanly inconceivable. He would be called the Son of the most high, and the Lord God would give to him the throne of his ancestor David: "He will reign over the house of

Jacob forever,” Gabriel said, repeating the words that the Lord of hosts once had said to Nathan, “and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

I imagine it was the middle of the night when Gabriel visited Mary and announced the humanly inconceivable thing God was about to do in her life and for the life of the world through the birth of a son; and I imagine Luke’s readers telling each other this story as they wrestled with the life and death choice that would soon be before them: either they waited and watched and hoped in the dark for the promised kingdom, when Mary’s child would return to reign **or** they gave up hope, threw in with the imperial cult, and bowed down to Domitian who, with his deified father and brother, would reign forever.

What have either of these stories to do with what we may hope on this last Sunday in the season of waiting and watching for Mary’s child to return and reign forever? Because they were stories people told each other in the face of an uncertain future, they are stories that bear repeating in times such as these. Given the evil that presently stalks the innocent around the globe and down the Avenue (Was it all in this week that another 172 women and children were kidnapped by Boko Haran; 135 children murdered in Pakistan, their teachers set on fire; hostages held in a chocolate shop in Australia; six murdered just outside Philadelphia and God knows how many more in the city; two police shot point blank in Bedford-Stuyvesant yesterday?), in the face of death’s dominion, you could say that, like the exiles in Babylon and like the early church in Rome, we are a people who have reached our limits, our ordered worlds collapsing around us; our moral ideals impotent; our imaginations disenchanting. You could say this of us collectively, but I also know many in the crowd who would say this of themselves personally. “When is enough, enough?” you wonder in response to the things that have befallen you. How do you keep on watching and waiting and hoping and praying for a

future that you are humanly powerless to effect?

The juxtaposition of these two stories spoken into our present darkness ignites in me the hope that the nomadic God who declined David's offer of a house only to chose Mary's womb and Bethlehem's manger and our mortal flesh for his dwelling place on earth, will find us in this present darkness and seek a dwelling place in you and in me. This is no sentimental or narcissistic Hallmark wish for each of us to have a personally close encounter with baby Jesus on Christmas Eve, the rest of the world be damned; instead it is a strange pastoral hope that, as the word of the Lord to Nathan disrupted David's royal future, and as the word of God announced by Gabriel completely reversed Mary's minimal hopes, God will disrupt our lives by God's choice to be born in us anew as *living hope* in the face of unrelenting darkness. For "What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within me?" Meister Eckhart, the medieval preacher and mystic asked.

Short of another virgin birth, to borrow Mary's amazement, how can that be? I think, in the first place, that the God who chose Mary's womb is the God who chooses still to dwell where we really live and where we really die. "Do not suggest some presumably noble, beautiful or at least decent compartment of your life and work, where you could give the Saviour a respectable reception. Not so, my friends!" Karl Barth said to the inmates in Basel Prison. "The place where the Saviour enters in looks rather like the stable of Bethlehem. It is not beautiful, but quite ugly; not at all cozy, but really frightening; not at all decently human, but right beside the animals. You see, the proud or modest inns, and our behaviour as their inhabitants, are but the surface of our life. Beneath there lurks the depth, even the abyss. Down below, we are, without exception...only people who have lost their way. Down there Jesus Christ sets up quarters....Yes, praise be to God for this dark place, for this manger, for this stable in our lives!

There we need him, and there he can use each one of us. There we are ready for him.” The eternal birth of the divine son takes place unceasingly in our darkness and anguish. We need only make room for him to enter in.

In the second place, I think God seeks to be born in us and to dwell with us as Christ arrives on our doorstep in the person of the other we are loath to take in. In Advent we are reminded that “misery, sorrow, poverty, loneliness, helplessness, and guilt mean something quite different in the eyes of God than according to human judgment; that God turns toward the very places from which humans turn away; that Christ was born in a stable because there was no room for him in the inn—a prisoner (Bonhoeffer wrote from his own prison cell) grasps this better than others.” There is a song sung by Sweet Honey in the Rock that has haunted me since I first heard it driving up to Maine for Thanksgiving. With each voice chanting the same notes, the minor chord deepening with each question, they sing: “Would you harbor me? Would I harbor you? Would you harbor me? Would I harbor you? Would you harbor a Christian, a Muslim, a Jew, a heretic, convict, or spy? Would you harbor a runaway woman or child, a poet, a prophet, a king? Would you harbor an exile or a refugee, a person living with AIDS? Would you harbor a Tubman, a Garret, a Truth, a fugitive or a slave? Would you harbor a Haitian, Korean, or Czech, a lesbian or a gay? Would you harbor me? Would I harbor you?”

It is Gabriel’s question to Mary asked down the dark corridors of history from generation to generation. Would we harbor him who comes to us in the flesh of the one from whom we turn away? For the God who is seeking a place on earth to dwell is the God for whom we have no room. Still he arrives on our doorstep. “What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within me?”

On this Wednesday next, when we gather together in the dark to tell each other the story of Jesus' birth, to calm our terror and hold our hope on high, pray that the once nomadic God, who chose Mary's womb for his dwelling place, will also seek to be born anew in our present darkness, born in you and in me. For "What good is it to [you and to] me if this eternal birth of the divine son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within [us]?"