

He Has Helped  
Luke 1:26-35, 38

“He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and his descendants forever.”

How in the world has the God revealed in a manger, in the scandalous vulnerability of a child, helped? What comfort has such a God given to people who still long to hear the voice of God speaking tenderly to them? In what sense has this God helped the earth, its waters stagnant, its fruit failing, its leaves withered? Or what hope has God’s help given the nations, shaken now not by the promise of prosperity but by the fear of its loss? As for those with weak hands, feeble knees, fearful hearts, God has helped them exactly how? Our readings this morning and our season of Magnificats have led us to Mary, now great with child, who sings at the last, “He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and his descendants forever.” What help has God born to the world in Christ’s birth?

First there must be a disclaimer: the help we think we need is not the help we receive from the babe lying in a manger. In the imagination of our hearts, we conjure an almighty Savior who will prove himself worthy of our worship when he does our bidding: declares for our side in wars and rumors of war; intervenes when things take a turn for the worse; audibly addresses our need for certainty; satisfies our spiritual desire for a mystery conjured at will. The help we think we need is not the help we have been given in the manger. “You have not come to something that can be touched,” disclaimed a preacher to an unknown congregation in the first century, “a blazing fire and darkness and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them....But you have come to Jesus....”

So I ask again: What help has been born to the world by God in his birth? In the first place, God's help is a help that we can never quite grasp. It is rather help hidden, concealed, mediated in the mean stables of our lives. *This shall be a sign unto you*, sing the angels into the anticipation that still is Advent. *You shall find the babe, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger*. Left to our own devices, this is the last place we would look for help. The scene is a scene of rejection, poverty, helplessness, hopelessness. Yet, says the story, this is where God enters in. Perhaps it is because this is where there is room: where the usual cacophony of lives lived to avoid the silent night now sounds in the distance, where the reliable helps acquired by hard work or fortunate circumstances do not avail, where certainties have collapsed and, in their wake, we are sore afraid. Here he is hidden offstage, not just among those turned away from the inn of human opulence, but also in those places we have kept hidden, lest our true need, our aching loneliness, our soul's utter poverty be exposed.

"Divine revelation," said Karl Barth, "is the opening of a door which can be unlocked only from the inside, not from the outside....We cannot discover the consolation, the direction and the hope which Christ grants to us; we can [only] discover our own lack of all these things and our own contradiction against them." In the darkness of this sanctuary on Christmas Eve, consider first your own lack and contradiction. Consider where you would never look for him, hidden in the stable of your life and the lives of those you love and the lives of those he came to save from life without him: there God is with you and there he has helped you.

He has helped, in the second place, by taking your vulnerability and need as his own. More incredible than the omnipotent help of the God we deem impotent, because that God has not done our bidding, is the claim that God has assumed our mortal life—has taken on our lives running toward death. I will never be able to get my mind or my heart around this claim. That is

why Mary's astonished question continues to be my own: How can this be? What real help has been given to you and to me in God's assumption of our vulnerable human lives?

The help has something to do with the fact that our human existence ceases to be our own in him. Certainly we have our lives and live them as we wish. But in Jesus Christ we behold the God who has chosen not to be God without us: who has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows as his own in order that we will never again bear any of these things without him. That is not to say that he keeps bad things from happening to us or that he intervenes to avert this or that tragedy or that he swoops into human history with just the miracle we had in mind. No doubt we glimpse in his healing and helping, recorded in Scripture, the saving help that awaits us eternally, in the place God has made for us in himself. But in the meantime, he bears our griefs and sorrows as his own so that, at every turn in our mortal existence, we are accompanied by the God who is with us, even and especially as we lie to die.

More than our life, then, he assumes our death; in effect, he does battle with the power of death to take from us our life, long before we lie to die, to the end that death shall have no dominion. To say that he was raised from the dead is to leave us with only one thing, one worthwhile thing, to fear: the fear of God's nearness. "Here," says Barth, "the question is awe and not agitation. Here no one can escape and no one can console himself. Having reached the ultimate limit of all that we fear, where God is revealed to us, we are no longer afraid of this or the next thing, but of [God] alone." This is why the angels sing, at the limit of all we fear, with God's glory entering gravity, *Fear not!* In the darkness on Christmas Eve, give into his keeping the life he has already assumed as his own, and the death you must die too soon, for in this weak, unarmed wise, he has helped.

Finally, because in hiddenness, and in the vulnerability of our mortality assumed, he has

helped, the question put to us in the darkness of Christmas Eve is whether or not we will allow ourselves to be helped, or whether we will continue trying to help ourselves without him. No doubt the darkness will hide the stable places you have brought with you to the celebration of his birth, the tears that are the evidence of woes and worries and the power of death still having its way with you. What would it matter if, in the darkness, you allowed yourself to be helped? What would it mean, for the rest of your days, if you were to hang your heart on him and put all your trust in him who has helped? The season of waiting is almost at an end. Now it remains for you to come to him who has come to you. Do not worry about finding him, for he has found you; do not be anxious about what to say, for he has assumed your life and knows what you need before you ask. Nevertheless, ask! Even if you cannot form words to speak to the God you quit speaking to long ago, try just one word: "Help!" Give into his keeping all you can no longer bear by yourself. For in the little town of Bethlehem, where meek souls will receive him, still he enters in and has helped in remembrance of his mercy. Glory be to God in the highest!