

The Presence of God

Isaiah 63:7-9; Matthew 2:13-23

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I want to begin with a bit of brevity on this first Sunday of Christmas.

In last Sunday's sermon for the fourth Sunday of Advent, I talked about Joseph and about what the first Christmas might have looked and felt like through his eyes and his experience.

I talked about how Mary tends to get all the headlines at this time of year, about how Mary is the centerpiece of so many of our most beloved tellings of the story from Luke's gospel, about how Joseph doesn't speak a word, he simply obeys and then recedes into the background.

On Christmas Eve, we had a series of readings from a reader's theatre, some songs, and four imaginative character readings: A shepherd, an innkeeper, Joseph, and Mary.

All was proceeding well, according to the script, each reader offering their contribution with sincerity and skill. I was sitting there, enjoying the service, following along in my copy.

We were nearing the end of a song and I glanced at the next part in the service. It was Mary. And all of a sudden, I had a very uncomfortable and alarming realization. There was no one to read Mary's part.

Kathy had said that she might do it, but apparently the email that I sent her to confirm this had ended up in her junk mail and she hadn't even had time to look at it. So, she told me before the service that she didn't feel comfortable doing it.

Ok, fine. I had talked to Jackie about being a backup reader and she had said that she had no problem with last minute notice. I would just touch base with her quickly before the service began.

But, wait. There was a question from someone. There were a few logistical details to look after. There was a conversation that took a bit longer than anticipated. And all of a sudden, the service had started, and Mary's part had vanished from mind.

So, there we were, mere seconds away from Mary's part needing to be read and I had no Mary. I turned around, panic-stricken, and saw Joanne Moyer in the seat behind me. "Joanne, do you want to read Mary's part?!" I asked. Well, more *pleaded*, really.

She must have detected the desperation in my eyes. "Sure," she said.

"Like, now," I said. "Oh, like *right* now," she responded. Yup.

I thrust my script into Joanne's bewildered hands and off she went to (flawlessly) read Mary's part.

As it turned out, I had gotten even the timing wrong. Her part was supposed to be after a song, not before, but in my panic, I had misread that as well.

I suspect not many of you noticed this, but there you go.

If you ever glance up in my direction and see me with my head down and brow earnestly furrowed, you might think I am praying or engaging in some other admirably pious activity. More likely, I'm agonizing over what logistical detail in the service I have overlooked.

Actually, I was thinking of this story in light of last Sunday's sermon, and I decided that it wasn't poor planning on my part, but *in fact* a carefully choreographed attempt to convey the theology of my previous sermon—to de-centralize Mary from the story, as it were, to give Joseph a bit more of a voice. 😊

That probably doesn't work.

At any rate, the preceding has no connection to our scriptures our theme for today. I simply offer it for your Christmas enjoyment. Lest you be tempted to think too highly of your pastor.

Well, from the ridiculous to the sublime.

I want to talk this morning about the presence of God. In our reading from Isaiah, we heard these words:

I will recount the gracious deeds of the LORD... he became their savior... in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but *his presence* that saved them.

These are words spoken into dire circumstances. The context is judgment and exile, but this is a communal song of hope and deliverance.

It urges the people of Israel to recount the gracious deeds of the Lord wherever they were, and whatever circumstances they found themselves in.

And it reminds them that it was not a messenger or an angel that had been Israel's rescue throughout their story, but God's *presence*.

It was God's love, God's mercy. It was God lifting them up, carrying them out of Egypt, through the sea, into the land of promise.

And it would be the presence of God that would lead them back from exile.

Even in dark times, the people were urged to remember their story, to remember the mighty acts of God's deliverance in the past, and to renew their hope in the character and strength of God for the future.

Isaiah 63:7-9 is a song about the presence of God that endures and protects, loves and sustains even when things look very bleak.

The presence of God. This is what we all want, isn't it? I hear this in so many ways in so many different contexts.

I hear it from young adults who, despite what the sociological data says about their tenuous relationship with the church, are hungry for an experience of God's presence.

I hear it from people enduring suffering, people whose health is failing, people for whom the days can be a dreary monotony.

I hear it from people who are tired, from people who feel like life is little more than a treadmill, people who are restless, unfulfilled, uncertain.

I hear it from people who are mostly satisfied with their lives and are committed Christians, but who sense there must be something more to this “religion” thing than just following the rules, going to church, supporting the right causes, etc.

I think all of us, to varying degrees, at varying stages in our lives hunger for this one thing. *The presence of God.*

But what *does* this mean? Does it mean feeling inspired while contemplating the vast beauty of nature?

Does it mean some kind of unique clarity that we feel about our future (or our present) during prayer?

Does it mean hearing a voice?

Does it mean experiencing peace in the midst of the storm?

Does it mean achieving some kind of victory over sins and failures that consistently beset us or a powerful internal experience of forgiveness?

Does it mean having our gaze lifted from the terrestrial concerns that naturally preoccupy us to consider eternity?

It could mean any or all of these things, I think, and probably more.

But I think beyond any one of these single experiences, the presence of God in our lives points to the deep hunger that each one of us has to know that our lives are part of some larger story of meaning—a story that is going somewhere, a story that is being guided by a force that is larger than us.

We long to know that we are not alone, and that God can gather up all of the pain and all of the joy of our lives into a hopeful future.

We want to experience a deep and vital connection to the source of all goodness and hope and for this connection to sustain us in our everyday lives.

This is, increasingly, what I have started to pray for people who are going through hard times. My instinct is to pray it away—perhaps this is yours, too. *God, make the bad stuff stop.*

This is a very natural instinct and we are not wrong to pray this way.

But lately I have been praying that people would somehow experience the presence of God in the midst of what they are enduring, that they would have this deep connection to the source of all that is good and true, even when they are walking down hard roads.

Isaiah 63:9—“In all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them.”

As I’ve contemplated this verse this week, I found myself wondering: What did the presence of God look like for Jesus in his first days on earth look like?

We might expect that if ever there was someone who would experience the blessing and protection of God, intimacy, unity, *connection* with God, it would be God incarnate!

And yet, in our gospel text today, we see that from his earliest days, the presence of God in Jesus’ life involved hard roads and difficult circumstances.

We see that earth’s reception of her king was a hostile one. We see that the “holy infant so tender and mild” was soon on the run from the murderous rage of the jealous tyrant, King Herod.

We see that the adoration of Bethlehem quickly gave way to fear and paranoia.

No sooner did the desire of nations, the fulfillment of the hopes and fears of all the years arrive, than he and his parents were refugees, fleeing from Herod’s maniacal decree to slaughter all of the children under the age of two in the region of Bethlehem in order to guard his throne and preemptively deal with the threat he imagined was coming.

This is a nasty text for the Sunday after Christmas! But it is an important one for us to consider.

Let’s first look at the geography of the story.

Joseph and Mary flee to Egypt. This is highly significant and symbolic.

In the minds of Matthew's Jewish audience, it almost certainly would have called to mind an earlier part of their own story.

It was in Egypt, many years ago, that Jacob's family found refuge from a famine under the protection of another Joseph (the younger brother they had betrayed and sold into slavery!).

And it was *out* of Egypt that the children of Israel came when God delivered them from Pharaoh and called them to be his people in the book of Exodus.

Egypt was a place of oppression and deliverance for God's people.

So, the baby Jesus goes down into Egypt and comes back out, retracing the steps of his people.

And what of King Herod? Who might he call to mind?

Pharaoh.

In Exodus 1:15-22, we read that the Hebrew people were becoming too numerous in captivity in Egypt. Pharaoh commanded all Hebrew boys to be thrown into the Nile (disobedience of this command led to the birth of Moses—Exodus 2).

Of course, we know that Herod goes even further in our text today, commanding the slaughter of all children under the age of two in or around Bethlehem!

Herod was a violent, paranoid man whose brutality was well known in the ancient world.

He killed members of his own wife when he suspected them of scheming against him. He even gave orders to kill a number of leading citizens in Jericho when he was dying so that people would be weeping at his funeral!

Violent, paranoid men have always acted thus.

Herod's behaviour is said to be a fulfillment of the prophecy in Jeremiah (Mat. 2:17-18), where Rachel is weeping for her children who have been taken into exile.

So, Jesus is also symbolically participating in his people's exile and return.

We see that Matthew's narrative is not just about getting Jesus out of trouble; it is also about Jesus retracing Israel's steps, thus demonstrating that he is the one who will make Israel's story complete, he is the one who will bring this story to its climax and conclusion.

In our gospel text today, we see that even in the early days of Jesus' life, "the presence of God" did not mean idyllic scenes of holy contentment and divine bliss.

It meant being whisked off in the middle of the night to a strange land by fearful and uncertain parents.

It meant entering into the pain of his people's story and beginning to redeem and repurpose it, from the inside out.

What was true of that first Christmas is true today.

Part of the mystery of God's coming to dwell among us is that God comes to us in the midst of the mess of our world and our lives.

God is not immune from the pain and uncertainty of a broken world, as our text from Matthew makes clear.

We wish God would just come and clean it all up with a mighty display of power. I know that I do!

I wish that Jesus' first coming had introduced the final, decisive defeat of all that opposes God's *shalom* in the world.

But God chooses a different way. God chooses to overthrow and redeem the evil of the world by entering into it and subverting it from within and working through the hearts and minds and hands and feet and voices of people who freely choose to follow his path to peace.

It is a victory that is gradually implemented—and one that involves us in the process.

And so, we look for and experience the presence of God even in the midst of difficult situations that do not naturally call forth our praise.

This is just one of many apparent paradoxes of the Christian faith.

Apparent weakness is strength.

Apparent defeat is victory.

The first are last.

Wisdom is foolishness.

The poor are blessed.

The barren woman gives birth to a child.

The outcast and the foreigner are brought into the family to play a central role.

The “righteous” and the religious are condemned. The guilty are set free.

The powerful are brought low. The lowly are raised up.

A child shows the way instead of power-hungry, violent kings.

The one who needed to be carried away to safety is the one who carries us and who carries and sustains the world he loves.

This is the mystery of God’s presence in the world.

I think that all of us can look back on our own lives and remember instances where the way forward looked unclear, or times when we were afraid and uncertain or bent over with pain... and God carried us.

God didn’t magically remove us from the mess, but God was there with us, steering, guiding, encouraging, and illuminating the path, suffering alongside of us, lifting us up.

This is how God works in the world and in our lives—at Christmas and throughout the year.

My prayer for each one of you is that you would experience the presence of God in what remains of the Christmas season and into 2020.

My prayer is that you would experience a deep and vital connection to the source of all life, all beauty, all truth, all hope, all courage and strength, in the midst of whatever roads God calls you on in the days ahead.

My prayer is that we would all come to know the deep truth that there is nowhere that our lives can take us where God is not already present.

Amen.

