

CHRISTMAS MEDITATIONS ON SOME MUSIC, POETRY, AND ART

Jeremiah 6:13-17; John 1:1-5, 14

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SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 6:13-17

HYMN

“I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day” verses 1-3

***I heard the bells on Christmas day, their old familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet the words repeat, of peace on earth, good will to all.***

***I thought as how the day had come, the belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along th’unbroken song of peace on earth good will to all.***

***And in despair I bowed my head, “there is no peace on earth,” I said,
“For hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth, good will to all.”***

The words of this hymn were written by the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow on Christmas Day, 1863, at the height of the US Civil War. The peace of his own life had already been badly shaken just a couple of years before by the death, from injuries in a fire, of his wife of eighteen years, to whom he was devoted. And just a month or so before that Christmas, Longfellow’s son, serving in the Union Army, was badly wounded. Longfellow’s poem doesn’t mention those personal tragedies. He’s reflecting on a larger context. But you hear and feel in his words the how events “out there” in the world bring suffering and fear and despair into the lives of individuals and families.

His original poem (which was set to music a few years later) includes a couple of verses, no longer commonly sung, that clearly allude to the Civil War: they mention the “cannon thundering in the south” drowning out the sounds of carols; they compare the war to an earthquake shaking “the hearthstones of a continent” and making families forlorn. But Longfellow was thinking about more than how the situation affected his own family; he sees how hate has torn apart his country, and he suggests that in such a context, words of peace – even scriptural words – have lost all meaning.

This song is about a theological struggle as old as humanity: Why is there so much hate and evil and injustice and violence? And, on a more practical level, can we have any hope at all, any meaning at all, in the face of it? where is God?

Throughout human history, war, violence, and hate have been among the things that have prompted this kind of struggle, made the idea of “peace” seem impossible, unrealistic, unimaginable even, made the very word “peace” a kind of cruel taunt. The prophet Jeremiah – about six centuries before the birth of Jesus - describes a situation in which powerful people were callously indifferent to the harm caused by their greed, and, perhaps in an effort to

maintain a semblance of order, spoke of “peace, peace” ... but as Jeremiah says, “there is no peace.” Because peace has to be more than a word.

At the time Jesus was born, his community (and thousands throughout the Mediterranean world) were living under what was sometimes referred to as the “pax romana,” – a semblance of peace and order maintained by the forces of the Roman Empire. But it was no real peace, and everyone knew that.

None of this is unfamiliar to us. We know the despair of living in a country so deeply divided by hate and injustice that it’s impossible to see a path forward. We know that beneath the surfaces of prosperity, success, unity, religious faith, and nice homes there is often a great deal of alienation, brokenness, resentment, and exclusion. We listen to the news and we hear about ongoing war (and saber-rattling) in more places than we can think about.

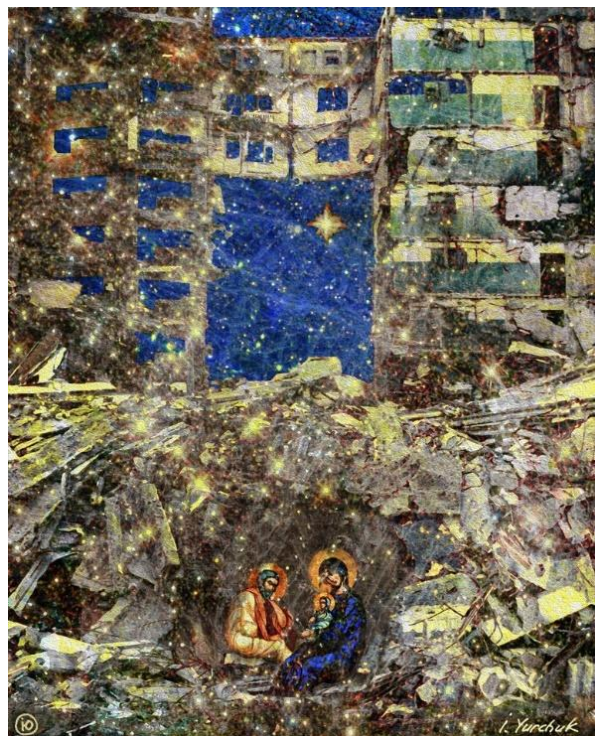
We too have heard words about peace, and thought, “there is no peace.” We’ve sung about “peace on earth, good will to all,” and felt that those words might be more fantasy than anything else, in the context of our world.

This painting, made just two years ago, by Ukrainian artist Irynei Yurchuk, shows us the dilemma: he places the nativity scene in the rubble of a Ukrainian city destroyed by bombs.

art: “Nativity”(2022) by Irynei Yurchuk

Yurchuk’s painting asks us to think about what it means to celebrate Christmas in a place like Ukraine... or any war zone. Or any place of violence, destruction, fear, and deprivation. This isn’t your traditional nativity of European renaissance art or contemporary devotion.

What’s different about it is not just the collapsed buildings and piles of rubble. The holy family is small amid all the destruction, as if to suggest their vulnerability and the possibility that the war will overwhelm and destroy the story. It’s not set in a distant and slightly unreal past but in a particular place and very much in the present. To me it’s a reminder that, instructive though it is to study the historical context of Jesus’ birth, any genuine celebration of Christmas or any real grasp of its meaning has to take place in the *now*. In the *present tense* of our tense world.



And yet, despite the devastation and vulnerability, Yurchuk’s nativity shows a window that looks beyond the mess of the present moment to a sky full of stars, and one very bright star. Here and there, even the rubble around Jesus, Mary, and Joseph shimmers with its light.

SCRIPTURE

John 1:1-5, 14

POEM

“First Coming” by Madeleine L’Engle

He did not wait till the world was ready,
till men and nations were at peace.
He came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.

He did not wait for the perfect time.
He came when the need was deep and great.
He dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine.

He did not wait till hearts were pure.
In joy he came to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
he came, and his Light would not go out.

He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.

We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!

Madeleine L’Engle’s poem gives us context that often our beautiful, peaceful images of the birth of Jesus don’t show: that all was not well in the world Jesus was born into. We think about the challenges Mary and Joseph faced, of course, their humble background, her youth, this inconvenient trip to Bethlehem. We talk about how the shepherds who came to see the baby were some of the most marginalized people in their society. But the folks the Christmas story tell us about lived in a larger context in which the powerful cared nothing about how their whims and greed and ambition destroyed or disrupted the lives of the powerless. In which some war or other was always going on. In which children died needlessly and parents couldn’t protect them. In which differences kept people apart. In which hate was real. In which few people held out hope for a more peaceful future. In which, no doubt, many wondered where God was.

We tend to tell the story of Jesus’ birth as if it is the happy ending, when in fact it’s just the beginning. We speak of it happening in “the fullness of time,” or “at the right time,” which seems to imply that the world was ready to embrace the coming of a Savior sent from God. But in fact, Madeliene L’Engle’s perspective is more accurate: Jesus was born into a world torn apart, broken, angry, at war, impoverished, divided (and far from ready to change). But that’s exactly why Jesus came. He didn’t wait for a more progressive era or a more optimistic time or

some more promising people to be born among. He came to be with “sinners in all their grime,” as L’Engle says.

We can wonder, of course, why it is that 2000-some years later our reality is not very different. I can’t answer that question, except to say that perhaps Jesus’ birth is more about “being with” than “come to fix things.” And to say again that the story of Jesus’ birth is really, should really be understood, in the present tense. It is meaningful that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, in Judea, in the tensions and divisions and brutalities of the Roman Empire. Christianity is a historical faith and the whole idea of *incarnation* – the divine being embodied in humanity – necessarily is specific about time and place and culture and so forth. But every generation has faced the same problems and repeated the same sins ... and demonstrated its own need for God’s presence and peace. We are like all those before us: to understand the story, we need to see that Jesus came to share *our* brokenness, anger, war, neediness, division, and stubborn pride. To be part of *our* world.

I want to show you another piece of contemporary nativity art.

art: “Bonding Time: Nativity in Townsville” by Jan Hynes

This is by an artist named Jan Hynes, and she painted it in 2002. It’s called “Bonding Time: Nativity in Townsville.” It’s one of a series of paintings about the birth of Jesus that are set in recognizable locations around her home town in Queensland, Australia.

At first glance this painting seems startlingly unlike most nativity art. It might seem odd - even a little bit irreverent - to imagine the infant Christ with Joseph and Mary in a gas station of all places. There aren’t shepherds or sheep; instead we have gas station attendants. The figure in front looks more like a child in an angel costume than a heavenly being.



But I want to point out that this picture is in fact just full of the traditional iconography of Christian art. The child-angel carries lilies that symbolize purity and resurrection – and she also holds a star. The arrow on the ground points to the way Jesus’ disciples are called to follow. A white bird suggests the presence of the Holy Spirit. The bag in Mary’s hand holds bread and wine. And it’s not free advertising for an oil company; the scallop shell is a baptismal symbol. In other words, it is the same story. The same good news. The same sense of mystery, reverence, wonder, and love. The same presence of the divine child... in a place we kind of recognize, among people who don’t seem very different from us. The same story, which we perhaps see in a fresh way.

Joseph holding the baby gives us a different perspective on his role. The workers make us think about who the unappreciated people in our world are, who might welcome God into their lives. The figures are out in the open... where anyone could come. The gas station setting suggests a journey, as does the arrow. The whole painting says, "the story is here, now. Be here, now, with the story. Because... Jesus is born, here, now."

We aren't ready. This isn't the perfect time. People and nations are certainly not at peace. Our needs are deep and great. But Jesus is among us, God's presence in the midst of our sorrows and fears and divisions and insanity. And there's no time like the present to come to grips with what that means for our lives and our world. Jesus "came with love," as the poem says: "rejoice, rejoice!"

We can't wait till we are better prepared, learn more or have gotten our act together. We can't push aside the mystery of God with us until we understand it. We can't postpone the celebrating the birth of Jesus until we get Christmas just right or feel ready to welcome his presence. We can't wait to praise God until we are feeling joyful 100 per cent of the time. We can't wait for a better time to commit to a life of faith and faithfulness. We can't wait till the future looks more promising or the world seems more receptive to Jesus' message. We can't put off our response Jesus' call in hopes that it will get easier. We can't wait to believe that "peace on earth, good will to all" is possible until we see it fully realized. We can't wait for another Christmas before we understand that this is God's longing for us, God's call to us.

We can't wait.

The time is now to live in the light of Christ's presence. Choose peace instead of anxiety, within yourself and in your interactions with others. Make that overture of reconciliation. Reach out to that person who's been on your mind. Tell your loved ones how much they mean to you. Write that note. Step out in faith to do that new thing you've been feeling a nudge toward. Make that change you've been putting off. Deal with that issue you've been avoiding. Reevaluate your priorities. Rest. Remember you are loved. Make time for what brings you joy. Not "sometime." Now is the time.

The time is now to be people who foster good will to all – and who will not be quiet or accepting of the climate of ill will in our society. We can't wait for some other time to become committed to building the beloved community, working for justice, being peacemakers, protecting our planet. Now is the time to make our voices heard and get serious about aligning our actions with our convictions. Avoid isolation and despair by connecting and working with others. Find a way to make a difference in your community. Use your gifts to make the church stronger and better equipped to be the body of Christ, the light of Christ, in the world. Commit to an attitude of peaceful engagement. Make time to understand issues and people more deeply. Love the people around you who are not easy to love. Be courageous. Open your heart to the pain and grief of this world, as Jesus did and still does. Now is the time. God is with us.

HYMN *I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day* verses 4-5

***Then pealed the bells more loud and deep,
"God is not dead, nor doth he sleep,
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,
with peace on earth good will to all."***

***'Till ringing, singing, on its way, the world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime, a chant sublime, of peace on earth, good will to all.***

POEM *"Love's Incarnate Birth"* by Madeleine L'Engle

Observe and contemplate.
Make real. Bring to be.
Because we note the falling tree
The sound is truly heard.
Look! The sunrise! Wait —
It needs us to look, to see,
To hear, and speak the Word.

Observe and contemplate.
The cosmos and our little earth.
Observing, we affirm the worth
Of sun and stars and light unfurled.
So, let us, seeing, celebrate
The glory of Love's incarnate birth
And sing its joy to all the world.

Observe and contemplate
Make real. Affirm. Say Yes,
And in this season sing and bless
Wind, ice, snow; rabbit and bird;
Comet and quark; things small and great.
Oh, observe and joyfully confess
The birth of Love's most lovely Word.