

Christmas Day – December 25, 2013
Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

The New Possibility

*Son of God, Child of Mary
Born in the Stable in Bethlehem,
Be born again in us this day
That through us the world may know
The wonder of your love.*

The difficulty of preaching Christmas is not that the sermon must be so big but that it is by necessity so small. After we've just heard Isaiah deliver his prophecy and Luke deliver his powerful story and Mary deliver her child, what is there left to say? The best we may be able to do is to stand around the manger and let the hopes and fears of all our years—especially this year—meet in the encounter with the God who came to us as a newborn child. With his birth, so much else was born: a new humanity, a new hope, a new possibility—a new God, as it were, looking back at us with brand new eyes that were older than time itself.

Christmas has a powerful hold on our hearts. One reason for sure is the fact that each Christmas carries with it the memories of all our other Christmases, from our childhood to the present. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, for some, they are

“looking forward to waking up in a house in which all the beds are full once again, with children and grandchildren who have come home for the holidays...but I know others of you for whom this is a hard time of the year. There is that empty chair to deal with, that stocking that stays folded in the box. All the rituals that were designed for two or more are now up to you alone and it is like the sound of one hand clapping...the memories rise up to meet you, swamping you with a melancholy so sweet you can almost taste it in the back of your throat...For good or ill, every Christmas functions like a kind of time machine for us, taking us back to every other Christmas we have spent on this earth. For some...Christmas is the smell of pine boughs and oranges stuck with cloves, the taste of roast turkey and peppermint. It is mom and dad sitting around in their bathrobes sipping coffee while the kids chase the new puppy through a sea of wrapping paper. [But] for others, [today] is a reminder of the way life should have been but never was—those who have looked all their lives through other people's windows at such scenes of domestic bliss, but always as a peeping tom and never as an insider.”ⁱ

So, for many of us Christmas carries with it the warmth and joy of our best memories as well as the sadness and loneliness of many losses as the years roll by. Again, as the carol goes, “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

This day also takes us outside of our own memories both sweet and sad, and leads us all the way back to Bethlehem where we are met with a baby. When babies arrive we are reminded of how open little ones are to learning, living and loving—to everything! That was brought home to me over the past three years as a new grandfather. Little ones literally embody new possibilities. Such is the case with the child we encounter at Christmas. Far more than a charming infant in the straw, we meet again, the Prince of Peace, the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us, the One who lived and died as one of us, and who rose again. This babe in the manger is God incarnated—“The New Possibility” (in the words of Paul Tillich).

“The New Possibility”—for all people and all creation and all time, including all of us, no matter what our personal situation. And here we are all of us, nearly 100 generations and countless wars and economic meltdowns and tragedies since that birth. Here we are still in a deeply troubled world: the world of Baghdad, Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan. In some sense it seems ridiculous to believe that Jesus, “The New Possibility,” as a babe in a manger—or even as a young man on a cross—a long time ago, could still be “The New Possibility” and make any difference in our world. But because everything and everyone is related—and because each event does matter for all events—we discover that God who was born into human life and lived and died as one of us is *still* “The New Possibility.”

Again, as Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, “Everyone is supposed to go home for Christmas, right? Only, where is that, exactly? Some of us know and some of us are still trying to find out, but [today] the answer is *right here*. This is our home [today] and we are all inside. This is our Bethlehem, where we have hauled the hopes and fears of all our years to lay them in front of a manger”ⁱⁱ—and encounter the New Possibility. Taylor adds that, “Any of us who have prayed to be transported into God’s presence this Christmas will get our wish—only not, perhaps, in the way we had thought. None of heaven’s escalators are going up [today]. Everybody up there is coming down...right here, right into our own Bethlehem, bringing us the God who has decided to make his home in our arms.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Obviously what happened in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago didn’t prevent our failing, falling and dying, nor did it solve all our problems, personal or public. But Jesus was—and is—God’s gift to us of God’s own Being and Purpose, God’s Presence and Power. This Christ who lived through all the conditions and consequences of our human way of life, somehow redeemed all life and death with new life, new possibility, for he is also the Risen One. And he is still at work repairing the world and restoring humanity to union and communion with God and one another and with all of Creation. And Christ promises to go before us into all the new places in our lives, and to come again in fullness and become “all in all.” Yet, as we await that Second (or Final) Coming, we can join him now in his ongoing repairing and restorative mission.

Today we are drawn to the mystery of the Incarnation of God born Jesus in Bethlehem, seeking an encounter with this God become human. In our heart of hearts we are all seeking a peace and a purpose, a place of belonging, a meaning and sense of worth

beyond what our own lives and our world can provide. We yearn for something more. So we look for a star to guide us, angels to lead us, but mostly for a Holy Family to embrace us. Our true yearning is for authentic lives lived with real connection to others, God, and ourselves.

At Christmas, we are invited to seek and join the One who introduced the possibility of a fresh start. Of course, we do not presume that around the next bend or two in our personal and societal paths that there will be a rainbow, as it were. As the statesman Abba Eban once said, “People, and nations, do act wisely—*once* they have exhausted all possible alternatives.” We have exhausted most possible alternatives. It’s time for “The New Possibility.” Let us join Him now.

Blessed Christmas to you all!

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, Home By Another Way (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1999), p. 21.

ⁱⁱ Ibid., pp. 21-22.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 24.