

## A STUDY IN DARK AND LIGHT

### Christmas Eve, 2012: Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-20

United Church minister and former Moderator of the United Church of Canada, David Giuliano, writes in this month's *United Church Observer* of something he calls "spiritual whiplash". He uses the term to describe how he and most ministers live in two narratives of Christmas at the same time: "One [narrative]," he says, "is of good cheer, returning to a warm home and crackling hearth...baking, wrapping, going to the Santa Claus parade with children or grandchildren, dancing, drinking, and gathering around a dining table which groans from the weight of the Christmas feast." The other narrative, he observes, includes alcoholics falling off the wagon; Blue Christmas and Longest Night services at which the broken-hearted gather in grief and muster defiant hope. He says that he comes face to face with the problem of poverty in this land of abundance when he delivers food hampers to families on welfare and those relying solely on old age or disability pensions. He visits patients who must remain in hospital over Christmas; and he conducts funerals, either a few days before or a few days after all the church and family celebrations. He writes, "the quick shifts from light to dark, joy to sorrow, leave my heart tired. I begin the new year...[with] a nasty case of spiritual whiplash."

What fascinates me is that the two narratives David identifies, as dissonant as they are, do represent the truth about Christmas: it is a festival of light that was born into a season of darkness. We who live in the Northern Hemisphere are well-acquainted with the literal darkness of the season: Christmas is just a few days away from the winter solstice; our days are short and our nights are long. All our candle-lighting and outdoor decorations is an authentic response. But there is also a metaphorical darkness present in both the Christmas story itself and in the context of the prophecies we read at Christmas. We have to look closely to get beyond the upbeat impression these readings give, but it's true: the people of Judah had walked in considerable darkness during the reign of King Ahaz before they saw the great light of his son Hezekiah's birth. Ahaz, as well-intentioned as he was, led the people of Judah into a relationship with the Assyrian super-power that essentially made them vassals of the great empire.

And Jesus' birth narrative, as satisfying as it is to preach on because of all the incongruities it presents, is a fairly gritty tale when we remove the rose-coloured glasses two millennia of art, music, liturgy, and storytelling have provided. According to Matthew and Luke, Jesus was born into a hostile environment. There was not only no place for the Holy Family in the inn, Herod wanted nothing to do with anyone even speculated to be the Hebrew Messiah. It's hard to know exactly what to make of the details the evangelists provide, but without question, the relationship between the Hebrew people and their Roman government was not a relationship of mutual trust and respect. The Hebrew people feared the Romans, and probably with good reason.

Mary and Joseph were essentially relegated to live on the street when Mary was at full term. Jesus' being born in a cave or stable is only slightly more comfortable than a parking garage; but if we were going to translate the story into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a parking garage would be the equivalent. And first-century shepherds translate easily into the community of homeless people in our cities. Not only did the shepherds live outdoors all year-round, they stayed at a distance from the mainstream of society, as do so many of those who are homeless in our day.

And so, how is any of this good news for our celebration of Christmas this year? How does this fit with the warmth and expectation we associate when people gather around the tree and at the table; when our children can hardly contain themselves because it is such a magical time of year? How does this fit with the joy and hope and promise we have proclaimed through the Sundays of Advent?

It fits, because through all of the grit and stress and homelessness and rejection, there is God, present in the gift of Jesus. Like so many truly wonderful gifts we receive, we don't fully understand what we have been given at the time of presentation; it takes a while for people, for us, to appreciate that Jesus is the light born into the darkness of human suffering; that he will, through his healing, preaching, and teaching ministry acquaint people with the God of mercy and the God of love who calls people to search for God in unlikely places, times, and circumstances. But he is that gift; the one who not only teaches about the unbounded love of God, but also the one who embodies that love, even to giving up his own life that we

might have and understand life as completely rooted in the heart of the Creator; as having its beginning and its end in God.

Our Christmas joy proceeds from a deep appreciation of Jesus as God's gift to the world, a gift for everyone. We all become poor at one time or another in life: our poverty may not be financial; it may be related to our health or our peace of mind; we may become emotionally lost; the death of a loved one may launch us into a season of grief and sorrow that feels as black as the long nights of December. Christmas is the sign that God meets us in the darkness and carries into that darkness the light of love which, even though it has the capacity to bring us to ground sometimes, is also the means of our healing and restoration. We weep on Good Friday at the foot of the Cross, but in Christ crucified we see nothing less than a God who will keep back nothing to proclaim passion for those who seek God in their hour of utmost need.

Without question, Jesus' birth among the poorest of the poor reveals the same love. Those who are so often thought to be beyond redemption, God redeems through Jesus kinship; those who live in darkness are visited by the One John will call the "true light which enlightens everyone."

Some years ago, Pastor Karen Bockelman, now assistant to the Bishop of the Minnesota Synod, observed that it is the broken heart that loves. This is our Christmas hope and joy: that God's heart broke for those without hope and without joy and transformed their lives with a searching, healing, sacrificing love that brings good news to the poor, heals the sick, binds up the broken-hearted, proclaims liberty to those held captive, and provides freedom to those who are imprisoned.

There are not two narratives, there is one. Christmas is, at the very least, a study in dark and light.

I wish you all a blessed Christmas. Amen.