“Two Marys”
Rev. David Gregory
December 8, 2019
Advent 2

First Reading

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;
He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

Second Reading
Hallelujah  by Mary Oliver

Everyone should be born into this world happy and loving everything.
But in truth it rarely works that way.
For myself, I have spent my life clamoring toward it.
Halleluijah, anyway I'm not where I started!

And have you too been trudging like that, sometimes almost forgetting how wondrous the world is
and how miraculously kind some people can be?
And have you too decided that probably nothing important is ever easy?
Not, say, for the first sixty years.

On this Second Sunday of Advent, we unite our souls around the Candle of Peace. Not to sound nerdy or uber-spiritual, but the five candles of the Advent wreath hold far greater symbolism for me than any Christmas tree. It is the story of Jesus, the Light of the World, shining in the darkness, illuminating what was formerly only shadowed. It is a time of revelation, a time of hope, of peace, of love and of joy.
For decades now, I’ve followed this same advent cycle, which grew mostly out of the German Lutheran tradition, because in these days of darkness and hibernation, in the northern hemisphere at least, it provides a symbolic illumination that my soul seems to require. I wouldn’t say that I am prone to seasonal affective disorder, and you won’t find me sitting under a florescent bulb to lift my mood. (I find florescent bulbs in and of themselves to be rather depressing, but that’s just me.) But there is something about the light that emanates from these candles that will forever remind me that all is not lost, that the world is a wondrous place, that there are those who are miraculously kind, and although nothing important is ever easy, it is always worthwhile.

Basically, I just need to bathe myself in the light at this time of year, to renew my faith in a benevolent universe, to tap into the energy of all that is the Cosmic Christ, and to swim in a sea of tradition that I might not always embrace, but I can eternally appreciate. Yes, even the Christmas carols with all of their patriarchal imperial language. I sing their words enthusiastically over and over again, words that I disapprove of at any other time of the year. We could, perhaps, go the route of the New Century Hymnal and change the wording to reflect our current values, but we wouldn’t in our wildest dreams chop up a Mary Oliver poem to remove the words that we don’t like. And then this song of Mary that equates wealth with power and corruption, and poverty with virtue—I don’t really buy into that, but if you look closely at the world in which she lived, it is easy to see why she would feel that way.

Like poetry and like Christmas carols, this song of a young, pregnant Hebrew woman comes from a time and place, and the tradition that has grown around it, though imperfect, gives us a consistent rhythm whereby we can have this yearly reflection that reminds us that all is not lost. I don’t know about you, but I need a good dose of this at least once a year. Without it, I would just be trudging my way through life, listening to the constantly negative news, and ignoring all that is kind and loving and generous in this world.

We’ve all heard of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, whose trustees—Bill Gates, Melinda Gates, and Warren Buffet—are among the wealthiest people on the face of the earth. The foundation was begun at the beginning of this century, and its primary goals are global in nature: to enhance healthcare and reduce extreme poverty and, at least in the United States, to expand educational opportunities and access to information technology. The foundation holds about $50 billion in assets. These people are not necessarily saints (or maybe they are), but their philanthropy expresses a kindness and generosity that is probably not reflected in Luke’s gospel which tells us that God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. Most all of the Hebrew prophets and poets see things in a very binary fashion. You can see where they’re coming from, but for us it just isn’t quite that simple.

The other Mary—Mary Oliver—begs us to look at it differently. She sees a world that is basically good, a place where we should be born happy and loving everything, but even she recognizes that this is not always the case. Mary, the mother of Jesus, carried a sign of hope within her body, longing for a day when the poor and the hungry would no longer be at the mercy of the rich and powerful, when the rich and powerful might become miraculously kind. Mary Oliver wants to
remind us that we live in a wonderful world, an extremely generous world, that the universe itself might be benevolent to the core, and that indicators to the contrary are only temporary in nature and will not have the final say.

In Stone Soup this week we talked frankly about whether or not we were hopeful for our country and for our world. As you might imagine, the answers were very mixed. My own answers are mixed, depending on the day that you ask me. Last week we spoke of confident expectation, and if I had to articulate such an expectation, I would want it to be of a just and peaceful world. You see, I want the world to be just and peaceful. I want people to stop being terrorized in their places of origin, and if they are, I want them to feel safe and at home among us. I want people of color to live with us in a world that is color-blind. I want white supremacy to be placed forever into its proper category, discredited and dissipated. I want people of all faiths and religious traditions to be respected and honored for who they are, and for Islamophobia and xenophobia to become relics of the past. I want people to be known for their character and not simply for who they love, or for what gender they express.

My confident expectation is of a just and peaceful world, and what I need to know from you this morning is that you share this expectation. If we do not expect it, it will not happen. If we do not create it, it will never come into being. If we lose all hope, if we look at the values expressed at the top levels of our government and throw up our hands in despair, then we really have no reason for being here in this place. We are here this morning and every time we gather to pool our energy, to join one another in hope, to encourage one another to keep going, and to remind ourselves that there is something far greater than what we see on our electronic devices.

There is a holy light within us that shines through the darkness. The darkness cannot comprehend it, but neither can it extinguish it.