

“What’s with Hope, Hearts and Lights?”

December 18, 2022

Rev. Ann Eichhorn

Fourth Sunday in Advent



Readings

Hebrews 11:1-3

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

The Message by Eugene Peterson states:

Fundamental fact of existence is trust in God. This faith is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. It’s our handle on what we can’t see. By faith we see the world called into existence by God.

The Christmas Spirit

Ann Weems

The Christmas spirit
is that hope
which tenaciously clings
to the hearts of the faithful
and announces
in the face
of any Herod the world can produce
and all the inn doors slammed in our faces
and all the dark nights of our souls
that with God
all things still are possible,
that even now
unto us
a Child is born!

This week while we were stopped at the big four-way intersection at East Blithedale and Camino Alto, leading into Mill Valley, we watched an older couple carry a six- or seven-foot Christmas tree across the street. We thought at first that perhaps they were headed for the Redwoods Retirement Center, but as the lights changed and they crossed twice, they made their way up towards town. She had the bottom end of the tree, and he the tip. It was clear the tree weight was perhaps a bit unexpected, but they were determined. One might ask *why bother to go to such an effort at their age to take a tree somewhere?* You could look around this room at the “stuff” here: the crèche, the angel, the stars, hearts, lights, wreaths, the tree, and ask the same question: *why bother, what’s with it all anyway?*

In order to address this question I had to pull a bit from my own career lessons learned. I have shared with you before that one of the primary lessons taught to me in nursing school was to take a couple of seconds before entering a patient’s room to take the pulse there, using my eyes, ears, nose – all my senses, to try to determine if anything had changed since I was last in the room. Likewise, in seminary the professors pleaded with us that when we graduated we do what we could to bring clarity and understanding from our studies of the ancient Biblical texts into the lives of people living today. These nursing school and seminary lessons help me to remind folks to use their minds, senses and imaginations to understand the traditional stories and myths that explain natural and social phenomena in relation to some supernatural being or event.

This reminds me of a comment made by someone in a breakout session after the sermon last week. With some excitement and trembling, the person shared, “I think I’ve finally gotten it!” and went on to identify what was now understood, “that the Bible isn’t factual, written by God. It is full of mythical records from early on, of a people like us learning as we go, how to be better humans in our quest for goodness, love, and peace to reign.” Those of us who heard this person’s insight recognized that it arose out of a remarkable moment of clarity. So to be clear: We as part of the Christian faith known as the United Church of Christ understand that the Bible is not to be taken literally. We know it represents ancient history, practices, traditions, information, misinformation, power struggles, political unrest. But it also tells of people acting to bring about justice, equality, unity, healing, and peace, primarily by learning how to tap into a love larger than themselves while also learning how to love and exist with one another.

Faith/Hope. We have to use our minds in order to understand what this means. Mind is the part of us that enables us to be aware of the world and our experiences, to think, to feel. It is with our minds that we can imagine. In our minds we can hope for something we cannot see; we can imagine creative solutions, and perhaps eventually we can act. Hope and imagination as part of our faith are intimately linked in our consciousness. This isn’t new information; in fact it’s what film directors, screen writers, authors, artists, poets, musicians, and scientists count on to allow others to “get,” to sense and understand what they are trying to convey.

Let’s go back a moment to the ancient text from Hebrews, with the words *Now Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*, and add Eugene Peterson’s more modern-day interpretation of this same text:

Fundamental fact of existence is trust in God. This faith is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. It's our handle on what we can't see. By faith we see the world called into existence by God.

Wow; imagine that! What we are being asked to do is to imagine, to picture in our minds a new creation, things happening to bring about a different world, a better world – one without hate, violence, suffering. A world instead filled with love, interdependence, equality, comfort, peace. So how does this connect with the Christmas “stuff” around us? Why do we bother to tell the same old stories year after year? Why do we practice and imagine waiting for something and then search for evidence of “the new” to arrive? Spoiler alert: the short answer is because “it-the new” does arrive year after year, if we can perceive it.

The birth of a special child who grew to be one of our most beloved and honored ancestors, who led the way with compassion, empathy, common sense, good will, and love is to be celebrated and remembered each year, much like honoring our own birthdays. We tell the story again and again of how against all odds and faced with incredible obstacles, Jesus was born to a teenager and her beloved partner. We tell the story of how they literally had nothing but the clothes on their backs, how Joseph as a young man risked breaking the cultural birthing traditions and blood taboos by being present and alone assisting Mary with the birth of the child in the meager stall in which they found a brief refuge. We tell the stories of the shepherds and the wise ones who read the stars and learned that something marvelous had just happened and sought to find what it was and understand its meaning. We tell the stories using symbols and traditions to stir our imaginations. We look to the stars above us every night to remind us of the cosmos we live in that extends farther than we can begin to imagine. We use angels as reminders of how our alert and protective senses often gently touch our shoulders or knock us on our heads. We use the crèche to remind us of the stories surrounding this special birth that included the need to survive. More modern additions to the old stories are the Christmas tree, with its lights and shiny ornaments that remind us of the joy of simple gifts, given with no strings attached, but are expressions of love. But let's come back to how we use our mental processes to become aware of the world around us, and how we think and feel about it. What is the world God is yet calling into existence?

If I were to poll the room, I suspect a dominate theme in the way we are seeing and experiencing the world today would be the horribleness of the events happening somewhere every day. Somewhere a war is being provoked, people are being killed, the climate is being damaged, providing more and more evidence of a broken and endangered world. One only has to listen to the daily news, pick up a newspaper, read the blurbs that come through our cell phones, listen to the sorrows expressed by our families, friends and neighbors to add layers to our perception of the bad condition of our world – a perception that often causes us deep distress. But what do you think would happen if we could make a mind shift and begin to look for a better world which God, through us, is still calling into existence? Might it be helpful to remember what Dr. Martin Luther King said years ago, that “we exist in slow movement toward a better world, with the arc of history bending towards justice.” Or to recall the work of Norman Vincent Peale, a New York clergyman, who years ago put forward in his controversial book *The Power of Positive Thinking* the concept of intentionally trying to train the mind

to look for good, with the claim that doing so had a sort of magical outcome. While this notion of positive thinking was challenged by mental health experts, politicians and theologians, the concept is still before us. How is it we perceive the world in which we live in today? Positively or negatively? How do we go about finding ways to sustain ourselves in it? Do we have any responsibility to make it a better world for the generations to come? Can we even imagine something different? Again, my friends, our faith says yes, that how we perceive our world and our place in it has an impact on others, now and in the years to come, and Christmastime as well as this time of transition for our congregation remind us of that reality. Where might we look in order to bring hope into play?

If you read the Independent Journal this week, perhaps you saw the article about the recent successful efforts of the scientists at our California Lawrence Livermore Nuclear Lab. They announced on Tuesday that they had reproduced the power of the sun in a laboratory! My 79-year-old brother is a nuclear scientist, and I try to pay attention to and understand things nuclear. One of the possibilities this scientific breakthrough may offer in the future is the ability to produce clean and possibly free energy. The scientists tell us that if fusion can be deployed on a large scale, it would offer an energy source devoid of the pollution and greenhouse gases caused by the burning of fossil fuels and the dangerous long-lived radioactive waste created by current nuclear power plants, which use the splitting of uranium to produce energy. It would reduce the need for power plants burning coal and natural gas which currently pumps billions of tons of planet-warming carbon dioxide into the atmosphere each year. "It will probably take decades to get there," warned the Director of the Livermore lab, Kimberly Budil, at a news conference, but what is also significant about this news is the possible change in purpose for the National Ignition Facility which oversees the Livermore and Los Alamos labs whose primary reason for being is to help the United States maintain its nuclear weapons. If we weren't focused on using nuclear power to kill others, what ways could we find to lessen its negative impacts and enhance the common experiences of our global community? Just think what it would mean to slow down or eliminate climate destruction, to not have to pay for gas and electricity, for everyone to have the power at their fingertips to be warm or cool in the weather extremes.

Another imaginative moment making the news this week is the new 3-hour, 13-minute movie "Avatar: The Way of Water." Director James Cameron takes the viewer on an imaginary trip to another planet – an otherworldly place with life and creatures struggling with their existence. If we can sit that long, we can use our visual, auditory, and emotional senses to experience something beyond the world as we know it. What if experiencing such imaginary worlds prompts us to explore more of the vast space we have only begun to explore? Visits to the moon? Mars? Other planets?

We are just coming out of a nearly three-year experience of how global pandemics and massive deaths can affect our realities. But along with the horrid came the creation of new vaccines and medications, and in record time. Through collective efforts, life-saving injections and care were brought to the masses. If we look at medical science and the laboratory experiments and breakthroughs such as go on in our local Buck Center Institute, we can begin to imagine living longer and healthier lives, with no Alzheimers, cancer, or heart disease. What might family structures look like that contain five generations rather than just three? If diseases can be cured and new body parts created to replace damaged or absent limbs and organs, alongside these amazing discoveries can we

find ways to fully fund the long-term educational journeys our young people have to take to become the doctors, nurses, technicians, pharmacists, of the future? What if every child had the opportunity to explore what they would like to be when they grow up? What if both parents didn't have to work fulltime jobs in order for their families to survive? What if hunger and dehydration were not a cause of death globally?

Last summer at our little state park in Washington, a nearby engineering company (Janicki) made a request and proposal with the state and our park to install the first toilet of its kind in the world, one that makes its own water that eventually could become consumable. It's a weird concept, but we saw it in action, and the campers in the most inaccessible part of the campground were delighted to learn of its addition to the area and to use it. One of the long-term goals of the company is to be able to produce these toilets and get them to parts of the world that are without water and sanitation. All this said, we are called upon to not only help envision a better life for all, but to support the efforts and dreams of others doing the same.

One more quick snapshot of something new is the documentary on Harry and Meghan. Because of the deep love they have for each other and the world around them, Harry and Meghan have given us a glimpse of the courage it took to break away from the powerful, elitist, racist regime and family that showered them daily with hate and disdain. They have a different picture of the lives they want for themselves and their children. Imagine what their example might mean for interracial couples who choose to marry and start families, or for entire nations to decide to liberate themselves from bondage.

In closing, I pull from Isaiah 43, another Old Testament text for us to ponder: *Behold, I am doing a new thing, do you not perceive it?* Christmas reminds us of God's love being called into existence through us – simple, ordinary people using our hopes and imaginations to bring about a better world.

Alleluia and amen.

