

Zealous hopes: Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

We have many defenses against hearing the Christmas readings and taking them to heart.

December 13, 2005

I learned something about what is possible at St. John's Abbey in Minnesota, just after morning prayer. I had told another resident of the Ecumenical Institute that the monks had begun 1 Corinthians, in case she wanted an opportunity to hear the letter read aloud. Her doctoral thesis had been on a passage from the epistle, and she was in the process of turning it into a book. This text had engaged her for more than ten years. She had made a pilgrimage to Corinth and knew Paul's words in Greek, in German and in many English translations. But as she listened in the abbey church, something caught her attention that she had never noticed before. It was a revelation that left her gasping for breath, and I believe she left the church that morning amazed, not a little discomfited, and above all grateful to have been granted a new sense of the Bible's power.

We have many defenses against hearing the Christmas readings and taking them to heart. The images are resoundingly familiar—"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light"—and the nativity story is so colored by nostalgia that listening takes considerable effort. It's hard for us to remember that, as is always the case with scripture, we are continually invited to hear "a new song," words full of possibilities we have not yet seen and can't imagine. All we need are the ears to hear, but our tired old ears resist us at every turn.

As the magnificent titles that Isaiah foresees are proclaimed—"Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace"—we may suddenly remember that we forgot to take the rolls out to thaw, and this means that our despised sister-in-law will have gained another weapon in her war of one-upmanship on the domestic front. Or our listening is interrupted when our child comes to us in tears because another child bent the halo she is wearing in the pageant, and we must fix it, right now.

I tend to enjoy Advent, with all of its mystery and waiting, but find it difficult to muster much enthusiasm when Christmas Eve comes around. I know I'm cheating myself, succumbing to my usual temptation to sloth, which Christian tradition understands as not mere laziness but as the perverse refusal of a possible joy. The ancient monks saw zeal as the virtue opposed to sloth, and in the Christmas readings we find the "zeal of the Lord" invoked by both the prophet Isaiah and the author of the letter to Titus. After naming the many promises made by God that are to be fulfilled by the Messiah—the lifting of oppression, the end of warfare and the establishment of "endless peace"—Isaiah states that it is the "zeal of the Lord" that will accomplish it. In the letter to Titus we are told that Jesus gave himself for us in order to create a people worthy of his name, a people who are zealous for the good.

But zeal makes us nervous. It is out of fashion. We prefer the protective detachment of irony or sarcasm, and regard zeal as pathetic if not pathological. When a person exhibits too much passion over anything—God, a political movement, the latest in tattoos or a popular television show—we label that person as obsessive or compulsive, and mutter, "Get a life!" Might we better understand zeal as Isaiah does, as the prerogative of God, who, despite the mess we've made of things, still chooses to care for this battered creation and our faulty selves?

If God can do this, why not just go along with it and catch that wild transition, seeing the "bloody garments" of humanity's violent history burned in a fire, all because—take a breath—"a child has been born to us"? Something so small and seemingly ordinary as that? Why not sing as the psalm commands us, joining in with the roar of the sea and the trees of the forest? The God who has created it all will come again to set things right, to judge in righteousness and truth, and even our most zealous hopes will not have been in vain. The zealous love of this God has already appeared among us in the flesh to train us for a new life and teach us how to welcome him when he comes again in glory.

Our gospel is the unlikely tale that begins with an emperor's folly, for in setting out to register "all the world," Augustus and his governor Quirinius put something into motion that transcends all earthly power. We know the story and how it comes out, but let's try to see ourselves in the shepherds' place, afraid to open ourselves to God and in need of reassurance, of being told not to fear. Let's be willing, like Mary, to take the words in, to treasure and ponder them, because so much is possible when we do. As these words wash over us they penetrate, despite our defenses and distractions. Their spirit can move us and change us, whether we will it or not.

Simply being present is enough, for church is a place that allows this transformation to occur. If we feel utterly exhausted, drained of all feeling and weary with worldly chores and concerns, so much the better. Our weakness is God's strength. Our emptiness means that there is room for God after all.