

GLIMPSE OF LIGHT

Philippians 4: 4-7
Zephaniah 3: 14-20

Faith Community
December 3, 2006

Introduction

It seems like we live in a scary world right now. Every day we hear of the threats of global warming (and we just had a week that makes us believe we're seeing it now!) We've seen the horrible aftermath of tsunamis and hurricanes. We know of the spreading tragedy of the AIDS pandemic.

There are wars going on all around us. People are bombing each other in Israel and Palestine; they are killing one another in Africa and Afghanistan. We've gotten ourselves mired in Iraq and we can't see a good way out. There are so many wars around the world that we don't even hear about them all.

We are reminded again and again that we live under the pall of terrorism. We feel it every time we go through airport security and have to take off our shoes. We were reminded again over Thanksgiving when the terror alert was raised to orange. Now almost every major fire or explosion brings the question, "Was it related to terrorism?"

Industries that we counted on for jobs, service, and products appear to be rusting away. Institutions that we thought we could count on have failed us: there have been betrayals in the Catholic Church and scandals among televangelists and mega-church pastors. Universities have faced scandals. Business cheating has filled the head-lines. Political scandals seem to be at an all-time high.

We wonder, "Who can we trust?"

I

In times of uncertainty and upheaval we tend to turn to easy answers and simple slogans. When the world is confusing and in turmoil we grasp for simple answers – we reach for something we can hold onto. So we hear: "think positively," "What Would Jesus Do," "throw them all out of office," and "God bless America."

I believe that's why fundamentalist churches are growing rapidly today; you don't have to think too deeply or critically about faith – Christ is the answer, no matter what the question is; all Christian moral values are reduced to one position about abortion and homosexuality. In times of turmoil we reach for simple answers.

In many ways we enter Advent in darkness.

II

In the throes of uncertainty, and even in the midst of bleakness, there is hope. Some things may be ending; others may be starting up. When the world looks like it's falling apart, it may be the birth of something new. When our old ways of dealing with the world seem to be crumbling we can look deeper – see more clearly – what our faith is about.

In the depths of darkness we catch a glimpse of light. Maybe we see the light more clearly because of the dark.

As Christians our hope is not in ourselves or the world in which we live. It's not in science, not in business, certainly not in political leaders, not even in the church. Our hope is in God.

In Advent, our hope is in seeing again how God comes to us in a manger. We need a bridge from God to us, but it is a bridge we can't build ourselves. The really good news – the real hope – is that God has constructed that bridge for us. God has come to us.

When the darkness encompasses us, God sends us a glimpse of light, a child born into the world. He's not where you'd expect to find him, not in a palace, but a baby born out in the sticks, to a young peasant couple, in a stifling cave, reeking of farm animals and manure.

In that most unlikely of events, in that most unlikely place, God enters our world. Light sears through the darkness.

Not only was a child born, a new world was born. Hope was born.

III

Our hope is not in legislative actions, not in scientific discoveries, not in the church's influence; it is in God. It is in the God who created the world and each one of us. It is in the God who cares so much about us that he slipped into our world by way of a common manger.

This is no simplistic faith. Far from it; it is ultimately beyond our understanding. We marvel at what God did through that child in the stable and we wonder how we might deserve that.

We wrestle with what Jesus said and how it applies twenty centuries later. Christ's demands can't be reduced to two political issues – his demands apply to every aspect of our living. The deeper we go in exploring our faith, the more we stand in awe of what God is doing. As Huston Smith has said, "The larger the island of knowledge, the greater the shoreline of wonder." We celebrate the depth of our faith.

Conclusion

Although these are difficult times, we have great hope. We are not alone in the world. We don't have to depend on ourselves. God loves us and this world, and God has gone to extravagant lengths to bring us closer to him. Because of that event – because of Christmas – the whole world is different.

Frederick Buechner said it best: "When the child was born, the whole course of human history was changed. That is a truth as unassailable as any truth. Art, music, literature, Western culture itself with all its institutions and Western man's whole understanding of himself and his world – it is impossible to conceive how differently things would have turned out if that birth had not happened whenever, wherever, however it did. And there is a truth beyond that: for millions of people who have lived since, the birth of Jesus made possible not just a new way of understanding life, but a new way of living it." (1)

This Advent we stand in awe of the enormous change God has made in the world.

Amen

(1) Frederick Buechner in Listening to Your Life.