

St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Fairfield, Connecticut
Week of December 7, 2005

“Risen, with healing in his wings”

“Hark, the herald angels sing” accompanied me through a store the other day, and a bit of the final stanza stuck with me: “Risen with healing in his wings, Light and life to all he brings, hail, the Sun of Righteousness! Hail, the heaven-born Prince of Peace.”

How we long for healing! Jeffrey Boyd, an Episcopal priest and physician trained in psychiatry and epidemiology, writes that 46% of Americans suffer from chronic illness, whether incapacitating or inconveniencing—ranging from high blood pressure or diabetes to systemic failure that nevertheless allows life to linger.*

Medical advances can preserve life, but leave healing distressingly out of reach. I recall my father's prayer as my mother descended into Alzheimer's. “Dear God, you healed the sick, so we know that you desire our healing. We ask you to make Lois well.” And he would add, echoing Jesus' words in Gethsemane, “If it be your holy will.”

That prayer was not answered in the affirmative, and least not in the obvious ways our family longed for. As is finally the case for all of us, healing came for my mother when she was gathered into eternal life, my father following her not long after.

Yet our prayers along the way did bring healing. When offered in her presence, they connected her frail spirit with the loving family she always recalled, however dimly. They also connected her with the communion of the saints, as the church calls it, which had sustained her since she first as a child called upon the name of the Lord. And those prayers, as they brought us as a family close to her and to each other whether we were physically there or not, in some immeasurable but real way brought God and healing to her, because God is love and our prayers held her in love.

The carol quotes Malachi, whose prophetic words conclude the Old Testament: “But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings, and you shall go forth . . . on the great and dreadful day of the LORD” (4:2-5).

That is the Advent promise we wait for. That is the promise of faith. That is the meaning of this awesome Incarnation that culminates not in death but in Resurrection. The prophet's longing is fulfilled in the Jesus story. The great fourteenth-century English mystic Julian of Norwich summed it up:

“And all shall be well. And all shall be well. And every manner of thing shall be well.”**

*Jeffrey Boyd, *Being Sick Well: Joyful Living Despite Chronic Illness*. Grand Rapids, MI. Baker Books, 2005. Dr. Boyd will address our Sunday Forum on this topic in 2006.

**The visions of Julian of Norwich have been rendered in modern English under the title *Revelations of Divine Love*, which is widely available.

Week of December 14, 2005

Closer Encounters

One of the most beautiful passages of the Bible, from Isaiah 55, appears as Canticale 10 in our Book of Common Prayer liturgy for Morning Prayer (it's on p. 86):

My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor your ways my ways, says the Lord.

For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your way, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

These words measure the gulf between God and human beings. And they make the doctrine of the Incarnation—that God takes on our human nature—both the most outrageous and most compelling of Christian beliefs.

It is unthinkable that God, the absolute Other, would become not only human, but an infant born to the most humble folk. It's like domesticating a lion, as C.S. Lewis knew.

But that's how much God loves our world, John 3:16 declares. And that mind-bending doctrine of Incarnation gives Christian faith its most basic hold on me. Christmas celebrates this miraculous birth that bridges the gulf between the human and the divine.

Incarnation defines Christianity. Incarnation also offers hope in situations where human relationships are marked by suspicion or scarred by injury. Recognizing a shared humanity that intersects with a shared divinity implies a mutuality of both need and worthiness. Knowing what we ultimately share leads to understanding that transcends the bitterness of difference.

This Incarnational knowledge has been most amazingly productive in the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, and it also has potential for Christians in our disputes about sexuality.

In a recent book called "God Happens: Discovering Christ in One Another," Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, observes that "relation with eternal truth and love simply doesn't happen without mending our relations with Tom, Dick, and Harriet. . . . [O]ur relationship with eternal truth and love is bound up with how we manage the proximity of these human neighbors." Encounters with our neighbors, Williams says, is where and how God happens, as we discover the Incarnate Christ in one another—even or indeed especially in those we see as most Other.

That is why Holy Communion is so vital. Sharing the Body and Blood of Christ is to participate in the reality of God with us. God deigns to encounter my humanity, and my neighbor's—even my neighbor who seems so very different from me. I find that I cannot kneel and judge at the same time, and that the posture of humility adopted to receive Communion also opens my ears to hear better the story of another person—a story inevitably both human and divine, the encounter with an Other leading to an encounter with the absolute Other, God.

Blessings in this holy season of Advent, as we celebrate anew Christ coming to be one of us.

—Rev. Ben Brockman

Week of December 21, 2005

A Christmas Gift to be Opened When Needed

One of the valuable lessons that Caroline Myss taught me, in an audio tape called “Spiritual Madness,” is that all of us have, from time to time, “a bad day in earth school.” When it seems like every spiritual truth is silly and every good deed pointless.

On my own bad days I have done what she said to do, so I share this as a Christmas gift, should you ever have a bad day. And that is to simply explain to God that you’re having a bad day in earth school and ask for a sign to remind you of one of the greatest spiritual truths of all: when God seems most remote, like a pathetic fairy tale, that is when God is closest to us—because then our ego is out of the way and we’re under no illusion about bending the universe to our design.

In that bleak place, asking God for a sign of God’s presence leads sometime during that day to a sign of God’s presence. Sounds unlikely? Well, I’ve tried it, and it works.

Now mind you, I haven’t won the lottery or found a new car with a Christmas ribbon parked in my driveway. But the little signs—powerful signs—do arrive. A thank-you note from someone who appreciated pastoral care provided—five years ago! A check to the parish expressing gratitude “just for being St. Paul’s.” An unexpected call from a grandchild saying, “I love you.” A full moon, awesomely beautiful, rising across the snow on the roof of St. Paul’s.

Ask for a sign, and look for it. When it comes, let it remind you of Jesus’ promise: “I am with you always, even to the end of the world” (Matthew 28:20).

This gift is less obvious than the ones under the Christmas tree. But don’t forget to ask for it when you need it. And the gift will come. As it did for Robert Frost, in a moment he recalls in “Dust of Snow.” He opens the gift even though he doesn’t name its source:

The way a crow
Shook down on me
A dusting of snow
From a hemlock tree

Has given my heart
A change of mood
And saved some part
Of a day I had rued.

A blessed Christmas to you and to all whose lives are closely bound with yours; and grace and the blessings of health, joy, and peace in the New Year.

—The Rev. Ben Brockman

Week of December 28, 2005

The Day after Christmas Eve

Christmas Eve includes something of the fear and confusion that surrounded the story of the Christ Child from the time of Gabriel's annunciation of the mystery of his conception. "How can this be?" Mary asked, with more than a little fear and trembling, one suspects.

And surely fear and confusion attended Joseph and Mary as they found desperate lodging in a stable and brought a baby into the world attended by whatever midwives might have been available to perfect strangers a long way from home.

I wonder how it all seemed in the light of day. Did the visit of the shepherds and their report of angelic choirs seem a dream, or a hallucination? And if a memory, could it have been any more convincing a memory than the dream that persuaded Joseph to take Mary as his wife even though he knew he had not impregnated her?

The Gospel for Christmas Day is the magnificent Prologue to John. It celebrates Jesus as the light of the world which darkness has remained powerless to thwart. John's Gospel, scholars largely agree, was the last to be committed to writing, around the year 95 of the Common Era, perhaps.

It looks back on the whole story of Jesus, and of the infant churches founded by his apostles. It presents the story of that momentous century in the daylight of hindsight, and as the light of day.

But John's proclamation is not proof of the triumph, or even the presence, of the divine in history any more than Joseph's or Mary's memories of Gabriel, or shepherds' report of the heavenly hosts, were.

The cold light of Christmas Day reminds us that even though Christianity is, in my judgment, the most rational of religious systems and the most sympathetic to science, we are left inescapably with the necessity of deciding, like Mary and Joseph and John, whether the fear and confusion that accompany human life have the last word, or whether the light does.

The enthusiasm attendant on hearing the angel choirs, and the fear and confusion that accompany the human events, never disclose an incontrovertible meaning. We must choose. And even though our choice may be rational, it is not definitive.

It's not an idle question, and in fact a simply theoretical answer is not worth much. It's only when we start living from the conviction of the truth of the story that life begins to assume a depth of meaning. When believing becomes living, and living becomes believing, it is nothing short of life-giving, as, like John, we decide that we have seen the light and that the light will have the last word, just as it had the first word.

In the New Year, may you find abundant grace for amply living the belief.
—The Rev. Ben Brockman