

“Joy Is Life and Hope Is Power”
 Sermon for 18th December 2022
 Third Sunday in Advent: Joy
 Texts:

Joy is life and hope is power. Those are, I might suggest, the twin engines that drives the Christian gospel. And my hope is that I will expound this truth in such a way this morning that you will fully understand it, and, if your engines are not already revived up, you will be able to taxi forward and explain with joy, your hope. I suppose that air travel is commonplace enough for you to follow my analogy this morning. Here are three other commonplaces, maybe four, that you can, I trust, fully relate to: 1. weather prediction—which is a naturalistic form of prophecy—2. vacancy signs such as are found on the signs at motels, or apartment houses—only, I am going to suggest that the empty tomb was a vacancy sign—3. false accusations (often lies embedded in a false narrative) aimed at alarming, or threatening us.

Let’s define our hope biblically. I am drawing on Acts 17:24-31:

24 The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; 25 nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all *people* life and breath and all things; 26 and

(I.) He made from one *man* every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth,

(II,) having determined *their* appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, 27 that they would seek God,

(III.)if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him,

though He is not far from each one of us; 28 for in Him we live and move and [a]exist, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we also are His children.’ 29 Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man. 30 Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all *people* everywhere should repent, 31 because

He has fixed a day in which He will judge [b]the world in righteousness [c]through a Man whom He has appointed,

having furnished proof to all men [d]by raising Him from the dead.¹”

Our hope is that God having created us **from one man**—we have unity in our shared origin, genetic continuity and consistency!—has place us, with benevolence of forethought

¹ Footnotes

- a. [Acts 17:28](#) Lit *are*
- b. [Acts 17:31](#) Lit *the inhabited earth*
- c. [Acts 17:31](#) Lit *by or in*
- d. [Acts 17:31](#) Or *when He raised*

(strategically), in a certain time and situation (time, space, culture and history) purposefully in this world. **He did so so that we might feel our way toward Him and find Him.** (v. 27) *Our “hope” is that we have all of that going for us! There is nothing accidental about what we are, who we are, and where we are.* Then, to feed, or fuel, or foster that hope, He came to us in His Son. He visited us, sojourned with us beginning at Bethlehem in the land of the Jews. That land was prepared by God through His sovereign choice and granted an Exodus, judges, kings, priests and prophets—signposting through each our progress towards redemption and the coming of the King, a King whose reign would begin and never cease . . . not ever. **That is our hope, our empowering hope, a hope that fortifies our faith and our confidence.**

Consider, think and pray. That’s good biblical, spiritual counsel—then we can come up with the best plan of action. **Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows.** Matthew 1:18-25 spells this out and we find Joseph faced with a quandary. Before their marriage was completed, Mary is found to be with child **of the Holy Spirit.** This is startling, and this is a problem. *Being of child with the Holy Spirit* is uncommon, extraordinary. . . an exceptional conception. Most folk in Nazareth would not buy this “explanation.” Before we get into other explanations, we should pause and consider the implications of this one: the others are calamitous and disastrous. A storm of gossipy condemnation would sweep through the village because everyone knows how babies are conceived naturally. However, no one knows how conception is done *supernaturally.* We are about to find out!

There was room, a vacancy, *my second commonplace*, openness in Mary’s heart to the will of God. She was willing to allow herself to be the maternal medium through which the Christ child could come to be born. Of course, it is not possible to refresh our sense of these vacant spaces and not hear, with Christmas in the background, Luke 2:7: **And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.** There was a huge crush on housing at that time so some have speculated that Jesus may have been laid in the manger on the far end of a private dwelling. Or that, *possibly*, there was a public shelter which accommodated out of town travelers with a large common room—so that, because Mary was giving birth, space may have been made for her in the animal stalls of a stable. Others imagine that a cave was co-opted for this purpose *because what we think of as an inn* (a lodging house with many individual rooms) would be a housing feature of another time and place. The point is the lack of vacancy: **no room for them.** That some family would take them in is the most likely scenario—creating a vacancy, or making room for them.

Does Joseph believe Mary’s account? Yes, whether he believes her comes before whether we believe her. (Some do, some don’t.)

What does Mary have going for her? For credibility? She has the testimony of her life, her integrity and her truthfulness. *Mary had a remarkable clarity of faith, her faith was nuanced and not simple—she was deeply informed by scriptural truth with understanding!* We know that she feared the Lord because of the angel’s salutation: **Fear not! And,** I think, she had the temperament of Manoa’s wife, or, possibly of Abigail—calm, imperturbable, admirable. I imagine that Mary may have, through tears (because people are wired to question such claims as hers!), explained the **unexplainable** to her betrothed. He had many solid, natural reasons to doubt and suspect her story. HOWEVER, they also had prophetic reasons to accept her testimony (Mary is well-grounded in these scriptures!)—Let’s let her speak her mind to us!

46 And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord
 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
 48 for he has been mindful
 of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed, 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
 holy is his name.

50 His mercy extends to those who fear him,
 from generation to generation.

51 He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
 he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

52 He has brought down rulers from their thrones
 but has lifted up the humble.

53 He has filled the hungry with good things
 but has sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel,
 remembering to be merciful

55 to Abraham and his descendants forever,
 just as he promised our ancestors."

and the thought that they went over these passages (of scripture, sacred history, prophecy) carefully, the *predictions* of the Messiah, and the angelic counsels together, is not outrageous. They considered, thought and prayed over them. Nine months leaves plenty of room for such conversation and the probationary period for betrothal overlaps with the same time span! Surely the profundity of their shared faith, their eager anticipation of God's coming, the expansion of their trust in their redeemer as well as their love for one another would argue for such transparency—such clarity of exchange!

And, then, there was Joseph's character. It is written that he was **just** and that his "justness" was framed with, among other things, compassion for Mary. Would he put his covering over her, or not—as Boaz did for Ruth? To this **just** I would append merciful, kind, loving and truthful for these are the revealed attributes of divine justice with which Joseph is reported to have acted. *It was because he believed he, protected her **not wanting to make a public example of her***—that is, exposing her to shame through "false" charges of immorality which might possibly bring the judgment of "adultery" upon her for she was betrothed (and that we are told was "*as good as married*" when she conceived). Satan could have slain Jesus in that manner! So we may be quite sure Mary was clear that there was no other man, she had not been sexually, or sinfully unfaithful to Joseph, or before God. And she hadn't. Accordingly, they leaned into prophecy and thrived . . . so ought we to do.

We have come again to "consider, think and pray," now haven't we? And this is the point in the narrative where we are told that **the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream**. If we grant that Jesus was, at this moment in embryo, in Mary's womb, this **angel** cannot be treated as the *pre-incarnate Christ!* But, probably this angel is some divine personage/messenger; or else Matthew is euphemistically speaking of God Himself—which is my preferred interpretation. God appears **in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do**

not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife (not fiancé, not betrothed, but **wife**) **for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she shall bring forth a Son and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins.** (vv. 20-21)

I warrant you, Joseph has no idea what save **His people from their sins** meant or entailed—at the time; he could not wrap his mind around the divine intervention of Mary’s conception, or the Messianic mission which would consume the lifetime of this Son! As for us, it is still a mystery.

Pay even closer attention here. Note that Joseph listened to the Lord and not to the gossip, he ignored the ignorant chatter which included the censure of family and friends, in their village. In order to believe God, Joseph had to overcome much and so must we.

I note here that they, Mary and Joseph, were neither poor, nor wealthy. A successful carpenter could provide for his family. Thus Jesus appears amongst the poor, and forgotten folk of Israel (they were “neglected, despised” and held in general *contempt* by the religious elite, the educated and well-placed folk in Jerusalem and Judah). If we were to locate God’s concern for the poor in this gracious period of Jesus’ life, growing up in Nazareth, being playmates with the other children of the village, we would be justified in doing so. **God attended them first and demonstrated that no place where He is, is ever “out of the way!”** The proverbial taunt, **Can anything good come of Nazareth?** (John 1:46) is answered with “Not only good, but the very best. . . for Jesus, God’s Son, came from Nazareth.”

So we have covered “vacancies.” It was that vacancy sign on Mary’s heart that signified her *openness* to God. She was available to God. So God knocked, asked and entered. If we consider the birth of Jesus a bookend, let us now fly to the other book end and stand with the two Mary’s at the empty tomb. No one expected the birth of Jesus, no one expected the empty tomb. *A supernatural vacancy!* Do you believe in the empty tomb? It is possible that an empty tomb was only scantily connected—detailed in prophecy, but not highlighted in Jesus’ reiterations!—overshadowed by the resurrection narrative. (*But both predicted in biblical prophecy!*) The two women encounter two angels inside the tomb **and they were terrified and bowed low before them.** If only they had believed Jesus! It would have modulated their terror, toned it down. And they were asked, **Why are you looking in a tomb for someone who is alive?** Didn’t you see the “Vacancy” sign outside Joseph’s tomb? It was “only borrowed” for the weekend!

Jesus arose, vacating the tomb . . . he left the linens neatly folded behind!

Please remember that these women had seen this Vacancy sign before. Outside the tomb of Lazarus! Everyone had see that sign! It was kind of published, public. The body was also missing from that tomb as well . . . a foretaste of the day when all the graves of all the saints shall be open . . . and empty. It is because they had not believed Him that they were so terrified by these novel circumstances. That panic is unnecessary.

False accusations. Lies proliferate: the disciples stole the body . . . say you were asleep on the watch and don’t tell them what your own eyes witnessed (the angels appearing, the earth and stone rolling away and Jesus Coming forth gloriously alive again—truly resurrected). There was a pay off (bribery) and fixing (we’ll cover you with the authorities). Do anything but tell the truth!

In the meantime, while the worlds war, we are to declare “a vacancy.” We are to promote an openness to the kingdom of God—we are to extend an invitation to all who would come, while yet there is time.

Our Lord is the Lord of history. He is in actually in charge. Nothing the nations conspire to do move, or agitate him. In fact, he laughs them to scorn! Putin must bow the knee to Jesus. And, frankly, so must America. We are pursuing ends that God does not promote, or support, or bless us. Our indecency, our protection, or “respect for marriage laws” as we define it will stand until God takes them down. **God will take it down for it dishonors him. It is a trespass on His prerogatives man’s invasion of His domain.** It will fall of its own weight for it is not just, not right and not true—and those who passed know it. Pray for them for those who call good evil, and evil good are under judgment already..

Is there a vacancy sign over your heart? Do you believe that *joy is life*? Mary did. Do you ascribe to the truth that *hope is power*? Joseph did. And is your hope in the power of God and not in weaponry and warfare? Then come on in, come in to the Kingdom of God where the Prince of Peace is King—where love dispels hate and truth dissipates lies. Be gentle with each other, forbearing and, if you cannot be really nice, at least be very kind.

Amen.

Appendix

I take little joy, as a watchman, in relating to you a picture of the hopeless mess our current world is in. Be advised.

I am attracted to beginning with the false accusations such as are currently being propagandized in the Russian Federation. Here they are: according to President Putin, the West is the enemy, and we, all Americans, are satanic. There is no fine tuning this: all Americans, this entire divided, putatively racist and evil nation, is satanic and must be exterminated. The “righteous” Russian nation is appointed this sacred duty, and Putin cites Jesus as backing him and his regime up. Putin seems enamored with violence—but we know who it is that come to **kill, steal and destroy**.

Both China and Russia, under the cover of national security, are strategically expanding their borders, annexing and occupying the small countries bordering them. I brief review of India’s response to Chinese imperialism will establish the similarities I am referring to. They develop the infrastructure, establish towns/settlements, populate the region and hold referendums to establish sovereignty. It is the same old, colonizing gig in contemporary guise.

So, the word from Russia to liberals (leftists) and to conservatives (extreme right-wingers) alike is this: “you hate us” and “we will destroy you.” Given that bombs don’t discriminate along party lines, and that cities, where liberal thinking predominates, are the most likely target of this projected violence, we may break through to a sense of common peril—we are all at risk. The whole experiment is in the bomb sights. Accordingly, we, and our NATO allies, are invading the Russian motherland and we, and not the imperialistic Kremlin (Putin) are the aggressors. Conquest and annexation tell us nothing about the Russian intentions, apparently, we, and the West are at fault. We are the enemy.

I am sure that I might be wrong. And I am sure that I can be disagreed with—these are immensely complicated matters. I would love to be wrong factually and actually. But when I hear “Death to America” chants, across the globe, when other voice hostile intent, I believe what my ears tell me and I believe I would be foolish to ignore the overt hostility. American is hated and blamed, scapegoated for evils that might more equitably be laid at the feet of oppressive regimes and tyrants! *I am listening closely and trying to report what I hear—I wonder if you are hearing different things?* If we are threatened with war and calamity, whether through acts of terrorism, or by acts of war, we can choose to continue to fight amongst ourselves—a perilous luxury!—or we can ready ourselves so as to make outright assault costly, and unattractive. And those who would distract us with mock scandals, fake hearings, progressive provocations, divisiveness and “crises of the moment,” are not helping us as troops are amassing at the borders. Let’s not be singing and dancing as the ship sinks! We should consider, think and pray about where we are.

President Putin is using the Scriptures, citing Jesus (even citing from the “Sermon on the Mount”), to bring us under condemnation as *satanic*. I do not believe this is true. I do not ascribe to the view that Putin is the “great white hope” of the world; he is certainly not Christ returned and not our King. Nor is Chairman Xi— although he demands that he be declared as such by the people of China.

I do not believe that the genocidal warfare Putin is waging against Ukraine is godly, right, or directed by the Lord Jesus as *Putin claims*. Putin says Ukrainians “do not exist”—the few Nazi’s of last February has morphed into the vicious murder of a whole nation this December. All Americans are not Fascists, although homegrown leftists like to declare it to be so endlessly. But, be that as it may, all Americans, according to our common adversary, are Russia’s target. He is determined to destroy the West (Europe and the United States) and the hatred he has whipped up is bigger than a threat of violence. He really believes this. Of course he does. Convincing Russia of the necessity of eliminating all Ukrainians . . . all Westerners . . . and all Americans means that we are, in his mind, the “new Jews,” fit only to be hunted down and slain. Russian could not be more like Nazi Germany in this genocidal business. The solders are commanded to kill them all and they are “following orders.” It will take an act of God to change his mind—or heart. This explicit animosity ought to unite us nationally. It ought to get us to stop oppressing and fighting each other. Whether or not it will is yet to be seen. . . but meanwhile we are not to be afraid. Be fearlessly godly, boldly Christian—your light is powerful. He is with us, among us. Rejoice. He is our hope.