

HOPES AND FEARS

Luke 1:39-45

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on December 23, 2018, the Fourth Sunday of Advent,
at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.*

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

Let us pray: *You, O Lord, are deeper inside us than our greatest depths and higher than our greatest heights. Our soul's house is too meager for you to visit; yet as you enter, we pray that you may reside there in fullness. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.*¹

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On this Sunday before Christmas, the Fourth Sunday of Advent, I want to do something I rarely do in a sermon: I want to bear witness as clearly and beautifully as I can as to why I believe in all we are doing in this service today: the *words* we say, the *music* we hear and sing, the *prayers* we lift spoken or silent. In other words, I want to say, as best as I am able, *why* I am a Christian and *how* I got to be one. I hope to do so in a way that is not so much about *me*, but becomes about *you* who have gathered and about the birth, life, and destiny of the Christ whose name draws us here.

A major reason I believe in Jesus Christ is expressed by the final lines of the stanza of a carol we just sang:

O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light;
*The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.*²

When I was in college, I heard a sermon entitled "Hopes and Fears." I knew at the time that the phrase explained what was behind my developing faith. That faith, "under construction" most of my life, is rooted in my sense that "the hopes and fears" of *all* people in *all* times and *all* places – "the hopes and fears of *all* the years" – are indeed "met" in the birth that occurred in "the little town of Bethlehem" and in the child placed in one of its rustic mangers.

¹ Paraphrases from Augustine, *Confessions*, 3:11 and 1:7.

² Phillips Brooks, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," published in 1867.

I.

In my childhood and teenage years, pillars of school, sports, and church anchored my life, along with a family who gave me both freedom and encouragement to pursue them. Yet there was also in those formative years sadness enough, tragedy enough, suffering and loss enough to create in me a hesitance – even a *fear* – of what life might bring.

- I feared the bears I dreamed about as a pre-schooler whenever I stayed at my grandparents' home in Arkansas.
- In elementary school, I feared the harsh words and sometimes physical blows with which I saw parents exercise discipline on their children, my playmates, so much so that I felt my stomach tighten, and like King Hezekiah, I “turned my face to the wall.”³
- In middle and high school years I feared the words I heard some people use – *and* their tone of voice – in referring to the four other players with whom I shared the starting lineup of a basketball team that won the county championship – none of whom bore the same color of skin I bore and hence were the subject of the disparaging names. In addition, I feared for some teammates whom we gave a ride home one night after a late game, leading us to see the small, dilapidated structure at the end of a country road without streetlights that served as their home.

But mixed with these *fears* from my childhood and adolescence were experiences of *hope* as well.

- The hope offered by the big blue sky overhead, the cumulus white clouds, the bright green clover in the backyard grass in which I would lie looking skyward
- The hope of victory on the basketball court, the sense of accomplishing something with others, the dance of joy that followed at the center of the court, with a crowd cheering in the background, even if the crowd consisted mainly of parents and girlfriends
- The hope that came when I stood at a blackboard in front of Algebra I class, wrote out with white chalk *all* the steps *and* correct answer to a problem the teacher had assigned without warning, saw her place a mark in her grade book, heard her say – in a near whisper – “Well done” – (without the “good and faithful servant”⁴ part).

As the years moved from high school to college to seminary, to ordination and marriage and family, there came success coupled with failure, love coupled with loss, confusion coupled with clarity, sin coupled with forgiveness, joy coupled with sadness.

In the midst of the tragic and beautiful, I somehow decided that there was “*something more*” than what we know here on earth: something majestic, beautiful, peaceful, exceeding even the *best* of what we know in this life. I realize this sense of “*something more*” had begun as a feeling in the *heart* to which, without much hesitation or argumentation, I soon gave my *mind*. Maybe it was the blue skies, the white clouds, the green clover; but I knew I could never sing, as did Peggy Lee in 1969, “Is that all there is? Is that all there is my friends...?”⁵ I knew there was “*something more*.”

³ II Kings 20:2.

⁴ Matthew 25:23.

⁵ Peggy Lee, “Is That All There Is?” recorded in 1969.

II.

When later I became a student of the Bible, I was always drawn to the passage before us today, the scene preceding the better known “Magnificat,”⁶ the scene in which Mary visits her kinswoman Elizabeth, and the infant in Elizabeth’s womb (who will be John the Baptist) “leaps” at the infant in Mary’s womb (who will be Jesus). In response to the leap, Elizabeth says to Mary:

Blessed is she who *believes*
There could be a *fulfillment*
Of what was spoken to her *by the Lord*.

A fulfillment. A fulfillment of “*what was... spoken by the Lord.*” It was this hope and promise of *fulfillment* which my heart *felt* and to which my mind so readily *consented* and that joined together to constitute my faith in the One who was the object of the leap.

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Once I allowed my mind to follow my heart, my mind began to do what our minds do at their best: provide us with *logic* and *reason*.

- If God *exists*, I reasoned, it would make sense that God would be *active* in the world.
- If God were *active* in the world, I reasoned, it would make sense that God would *visit* the world, even *live in it* for a while as *a positive force for good*, as the gospel writer John says, “full of grace and truth.”⁷

Everything I had known and continued to learn about Jesus of Nazareth led me to see him as this *positive force for good*, this fulfillment, this Emmanuel (God-with-us). Such belief became a part of who I am.

III.

But beyond this *feeling* of the heart and *assent* of the mind, what makes belief so all-encompassing for me is who the child in Mary’s womb *grew up* to be. What I came to know about Christ – from both the New Testament *and* the way others have received him – is that Christ *embodies* in his own *flesh* and *blood* these “*hopes* and *fears* of *all* the years.”

I came to realize that:

Everything *I* fear *Christ* has feared

Everything *I* experience *Christ* has experienced

There is nothing *I* can go through that *Christ* has not gone through

There is nothing *fulfilled* in me or us that has not been *fulfilled* in him.

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⁶ Luke 1:46-55.

⁷ John 1:14.

As I came to realize that “the hopes and fears of all the years” are met in Christ, I found texts in the Old and New Testament Testaments that bear similar witness – directly or indirectly – to this fulfillment.

Psalm 139:

*Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.*

*If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night’,
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.⁸*

Likewise, the Epistle to the Hebrews:

*Since, then,
We have a great high priest
Who has passed through the heavens,
Jesus, the Son of God,
Let us hold fast to our confession.*

*For we do not have a high priest
Who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses,
But we have one who in every respect
Has been tested as we are,
Yet without sin.⁹*

“The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” “A fulfillment of what has been spoken by the Lord.”

IV.

I normally lead Inquirers and New Member Classes on Sunday mornings at 9:45, so I am unavailable to attend to the presentations in Adult Education, though I often listen later via podcast.

For the past three weeks, I have listened to the presentations given by Jim Muyskens, an incoming elder in our church, *slightly* senior to me in years but *significantly* senior to me in knowledge.

The question Jim sought to address: “How is it possible for us to maintain Christian belief in the twenty-first century?”

⁸ Psalm 139:7-12.

⁹ Hebrews 4:14-16

In a mere three weeks, Jim sought to address miracles, the problem of evil, the changes in the view of the physical world and universe brought about by evolutionary biology and other branches of science, and challenges to Christian faith posed by what are called the New Atheists.

At the end of the third week, Jim concluded his presentation by saying (and I paraphrase):

The primary events in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the long awaited Messiah, reveal the *highest power in the universe*, AGAPE love, self giving love that suffers *with us* and *for us*.

The essence of the Christian message, Jim says, is that we are all *unworthy* (hence the continued violence and death across the centuries), but by God's grace, we have been *made* worthy and *accepted* unconditionally (through the self giving, AGAPE love that suffers *with us* and *for us*, the highest power in the universe.)

Hence, [he concluded], we venture forth with gratitude.¹⁰

This self-giving, AGAPE love is the *fulfillment* about which Elizabeth spoke to Mary.

- It is the *highest power in the universe*.
- It is what lies *beyond* the blue sky, the white clouds, the green clover.

But in Christian belief and affirmation, it is a *force* which has been *embodied* in the person of Jesus Christ, as Emmanuel, *God with us*.

While it would be *comforting* to believe, as many do, that there is a *generalized* power of good in the universe, how much more *reassuring* – and *blessed* – it is – at least for me – to believe that that power resides in a *particular* human being, a particular person, Jesus Christ, who *was* and *is* Emmanuel, *God-with-us*.

“The hopes and fears of all the years are met in him tonight.”

“He is a fulfillment of what has been spoken by the Lord.”

Amen.

¹⁰ These are available at <https://wpc-alex.org/adult-education-podcast/>.