

Christmas Eve Meditation 2019

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I wonder if you noticed that when the Angel greeted Mary, the Mother of Jesus, he used the words ministers are supposed to say, “the Lord is with you.” But Mary missed it, she was troubled by it, Luke says. We shouldn’t be surprised, this happens a lot with words, we miss their meaning because we hear them so much. This greeting that Mary received can also be translated “rejoice” or “joy.” This time during the first century this would have been as common a greeting as someone saying to you or me, “hey.”

An angel comes to Mary and says “hey.”

But what about the joy, what about the reality behind those words? I wonder if something like that hasn’t also happened with our use of “Merry Christmas.” What are we saying there? *Christ...mas...Merry?* What’s the reality behind those words?

St Luke tells us that Mary pondered at what sort of greeting this might be.

To a writer named David Foster Wallace, the words that were used at an AA meeting seemed hopelessly trite. “Keep coming” “easy does it” “one day at a time” “hang in there.” Bland banal words. In the teeth of addiction how could words like this make a difference. And yet, as he notes, the only ones who weren’t face down in the gutter 9 months later were, as he called them, “the old crocodiles with Styrofoam cups and trite words.”

What if something is trite because it’s been repeated, and what it’s been repeated because it has changed lives, and what if it has changed lives because there is a reality behind the words. Maybe, Wallace points out, maybe the more vapid the cliché, the sharper the k9s of the real truth it covers.

It’s easy to feel the same way about the Christmas words, that they’re worn and tired, from another age, a time of visions and prophets, less informed than ours, a time with magic bells and flying reindeer. They might be good for a children’s story, or for a night, like a box of chocolates. But they, like the night will pass. But we wish they wouldn’t pass right. Silent night, weary world rejoices goodwill toward men, dawn of redeeming grace God and sinner reconciled, prince of peace born in us today. Would that these words would be true, that when we wake they would still be with us tomorrow, that they would be the headline news, I would give myself to these words, wouldn’t you?

But isn’t this the beginning of belief? Not to know the words are true, but to wish that they might be.

This is the way it was for Mary, it says that she struggled with the words, perplexed, confused. The angel said to her, “the Lord is with you.” “The Lord is with me?” And she pondered what sort of greeting this could be. She was profoundly vulnerable, a young woman in a man’s world, this soon to be mother was profoundly vulnerable, about to lose her husband, cast out in shame, maybe even killed. Mary, like the other women in Matthew’s genealogy (widow, harlot, immigrant), Mary is a woman on the margins, a woman vulnerable.

What kind of greeting is this? The Lord is with you? Dear sweet Mary, pay attention to the words, do you not remember that words have meaning. God is not silent. God is a speaking God. Don’t you remember: “In the beginning God said, let there be light...and there was light.” We live in a world created by and given power by words. Words still come, “the word of the Lord came to so and so.” Words that change history and have power, as the psalmist writes “the word of the lord has the power to break the cedars of Lebanon.” And personal words: “your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.”

Remember Mary, your people treasured God’s words, memorized, repeated, wrote these words down. We call these words God’s Word.

A girl is on an airplane one day and she pulls out her bible and the man next to her asks what she's reading. My bible. BIBLE!! You don't really believe all that stuff about walking on water, Jonah living for three days in the belly of the fish, you don't really believe that do you? And she said, when I get to heaven I'll ask him. But what if he's not in heaven? The man said. Well then you can ask him.

Yes we can be skeptical, our lives can sort of become immune to the words power, we hear so many words after all, 16,000 of them a day. There are words that are passing through us digitally when we're not even thinking about them. We are the most marketed to generation of people in history, and yet we come to hear these words: "the Lord is with you."

I'm sorry if there is a distinct lack of triumphalism in this Christmas Eve message, you know like "Jesus is born, thank the Lord, all our problems are over...we win." You hear this in the church. But these are not the kind of words that bring comfort to me now. You see this year has brought us through the deepest darkest places together. Sitting at bedsides, searching for words after hearing assessment after assessment, results after results, prognoses after prognoses. So many words. They were searching for answers, searching for possibility, searching for comfort.

But the only words that had any affect, the only words that brought a sense of possibility in the midst of utter confusion were the words we greet one another with every week: "The Lord is with you."

The angel says to poor mary in verse 37, nothing is impossible with God. No word from God will be without power, This is why Mary responds let it be to me according to your word. And now even in the upheaval of her crisis, the joy comes. Rejoice.

It's not just Mary, later in verse 41, when Elizabeth hears Mary's voice, Mary's greeting, the child within her leaps, and she is filled with the Holy Spirit at the hearing of this word. This is a preview of Pentecost, that when the word comes lives are transformed and community forms. God's word will never be without power. The Lord is with you.

This is the testimony of Mary. With all her disbelief, she gives in to belief. This is the testimony of Elizabeth as she bows in wonder before the child. This is the testimony of St. Luke who has undertaken to carefully write a first-hand account from the testimony of eye witnesses, so that we may know the truth. This is my testimony. The word of God's peace came to us in the prayers and love of God's people in our time of unimaginable distress. Even when it has been hard for us to believe, given what we've seen, you continue to believe, and that has sustained and enhanced our capacity for faith.

And this is our vision for 2020, it is a 2020 vision, that the word of God's peace would go forth from pockets of people here in this community and around Wabash, who are inviting one another into relationships of love and support because that's what Jesus has done for us. Lives transformed, justice pursued, poverty alleviated, broken relationships healed, immigrants and refugees welcomed. We got a glimpse of this the other day as a group of people from WPC were there at the Drug Court Graduation (Amy's beloved drug court) two people's lives surrounded by love and support, being told by their community that they matter and that there is more for them in this community and in this life, and we're going to be there to see that it happens. This is an exciting new vision for our community.

The Lord is with us. These are not just trite words. These words have endured, and what if the reason they've endured is because they have power. Words like He is risen, Words like you are forgiven, words like God loves you, words like you are a new creation, words like you are a new creation, words like be filled. Maybe these words speak to us because they're true, they have a reality behind them that is powerful and can change lives.

This is why we make such a big deal about Christmas Eve, because the Word is a person. It's because we have living loving relationship with Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. We want you to have that peace that passes all understanding, and to know that whatever your crisis, you are deeply loved and welcome to be here and participate in that

So let's see if the minister can get it right this time. I'll say it first and then your can respond, "and also with you."

The Lord is with you...and also with you.