

Christmas Morning Meditation

11 AM Sunday December 25, 2011

Peter JB Carman

John 1:1-14

What a lovely and rare opportunity it is for us as American Protestants to worship together on Christmas day. For the Chin youth choir who has led us in song this morning, this is nothing unusual. At home in the hills of Chin state in Burma, I know that you always go to church on Christmas day, but for many people in the United States, Christmas Eve is when we go to church, and then on Christmas morning we stay home, and celebrate with family and a few friends—unless it is a Sunday.

But today we have a Christmas service in the morning light, and we remember once more the birth of the Christ child, this time not with candlelight, but in the morning light. “Brightest and best of the stars of the morning” goes the old song, “Dawn on our pathway and lend us your aid.” And the second verse is as good or better than the first: “Vainly we offer each ample oblation, vainly with gifts Jesus’ favor secure. Richer by far is the heart’s adoration, Dearer to God are the gifts of the poor.”

In the hills of Burma, in the plains of India, in the villages of central Europe and the ancient cities of Africa, all around the world, followers of Jesus gather Christmas morning to remember the coming of the one we claim as Light to humanity, the one through whom we sense we have encountered the holy.

It is easy of course to lose our way, to get caught up in the cycle of living and working, toiling and troubling, to lose sight of the wonder that is God revealed in our midst. Perhaps that is why Christ showed up not in a palace and not in a fortress but a little child laid in a manger. Perhaps that is why he lived all his life on the run, and died the death of a rebel slave. Jesus came to us in the most painfully ordinary and difficult of times, one of us, one of the little people. Somehow in meeting this person over the course of his life, beginning, if Luke’s gospel is to be believed, in infancy, people came to believe that their lives had purpose, had a meaning and a direction, after all. Somehow through this very plain person, they came into contact with a God who was not plain at all. Gerard Manley Hopkins, priest and poet, put it this way, well over a century ago:

*THE WORLD is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod; 5
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.*

*And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.
~Gerard Manley Hopkins, “God’s Grandeur”*

It is one thing to glimpse the light of course, and another thing to walk in it. It is one thing to have an aha experience, and another thing to live every day as an aha experience. Few of us can claim to walk without wavering by the light of the good news of a Love that has broken into the world and made everything new. I wish for each of us the new sense of light and hope that is communicated in Minnesota folksinger Peter Mayer’s song, “Everything is Holy Now.”

*When I was in Sunday school
We would learn about the time
Moses split the sea in two
Jesus made the water wine
And I remember feeling sad
That miracles don’t happen still
But now I can’t keep track
‘Cause everything’s a miracle*

*Everything, Everything
Everything's a miracle*

*Wine from water is not so small
But an even better magic trick
Is that anything is here at all
So the challenging thing becomes
Not to look for miracles
But finding where there isn't one*

*When holy water was rare at best
It barely wet my fingertips
But now I have to hold my breath
Like I'm swimming in a sea of it
It used to be a world half there
Heaven's second rate hand-me-down
But I walk it with a reverent air
'Cause everything is holy now
Everything, everything
Everything is holy now*

*Read a questioning child's face
And say it's not a testament
That'd be very hard to say
See another new morning come
And say it's not a sacrament
I tell you that it can't be done*

*This morning, outside I stood
And saw a little red-winged bird
Shining like a burning bush
Singing like a scripture verse
It made me want to bow my head
I remember when church let out
How things have changed since then
Everything is holy now
It used to be a world half-there
Heaven's second rate hand-me-down
But I walk it with a reverent air
'Cause everything is holy now.*

Today, today we celebrate the coming of the One who showed us what was holy, not in the rare cathedral air, but in the day in and the day out, in the love of one human being for another. Today we celebrate the arrival of the One who came to teach us how to live by love instead of fear, to walk by faith instead of certainty, to plan on the basis of conviction instead of calculation.

To live this way, to walk in this light, is a revolution. It starts with a revolution in our personal consciousness—and it leads from there to a revolution in our relationships, and it leads from there to a revolution in how we relate to everything...and every one. Because everything is, indeed, a miracle. Because every life is a revelation of God. Because every human being is, for a fact, a child of Holy One. Because every blade of grass, every dusty path, every tree and every valley is testimony to the wonder of God.

We are walking in the light of God, friends, a lovely holy stumbling kind of a hike. Look to a morning long ago, when the infant Jesus first saw the sun rise. And look around, right here today. We are in the presence of God. And it is a whole new day.