

Advent 3
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

December 14, 2014
Rev. Paul Moore

Incarnation

The other day Karisse and I were putting up our version of a Christmas Tree. Fitting for the location in which we live, last year I drove out into the hills and cut an agave flower. This is the second year it has served as a southwest Christmas Tree.

What is a Christmas Tree? Various legends exist for its use in Christian celebrations of the Incarnation. One such legend goes back to St. Boniface, an 8th century English missionary bishop to Germany. He went to Rome to confer with Pope Jerome, and on his return found his people once again reverting to their pre-Christian traditions. They were about to sacrifice a young man under Odin's Sacred Oak. In a fit of fury Boniface took up an axe and struck the tree at its base. A strong gust of wind blew the tree over, and all were amazed and recognized the hand of God.

They asked the Bishop how they should celebrate Christmas. Familiar with the local custom of taking evergreen boughs into homes at this time of year, he pointed to a little fir tree growing at the foot of the oak that had miraculously survived the fall of the great tree. "Take one of these symbols of peace home," he said, "and celebrate the peace of Christ."

This story illustrates some truths for us. Like in Boniface's day, there are two stories out there about how to celebrate Christmas. One is the voice of the economic worldview. As Karisse and I were putting up the decorations we had her computer on to Pandora. We listened to "holiday music," and I was a bit surprised to hear about 7 or 8 songs in a row that did not mention the Incarnation in any way, shape or form. One could say that our culture is reverting to a neo-pagan celebration. In the depths of winter we seek signs of hope, so we give of the abundance stored up from warmer days. We throw parties under a thin desire to make all well that ends well. The other is the voice of the Church: The source of hope in the midst of Midwinter's cold and dark is the Incarnation of God.

I was a bit miffed at what appeared to be a coopting of the Christian message for commercial ends. Whereas that certainly happens, in the beginning, the Church was the first to do the coopting. Well before the Christians came along, Romans were celebrating Saturnium, and the Celts and Germans were celebrating Mid-Winter. There is no indication of the church's celebration of Christmas at this time of year before 336 CE.

But perhaps "Coopt" is too harsh a word. In reality the roots of our understanding of Christmas do not replace more ancient understandings, they enhance them. Christ expresses all that the ancient Romans, Germans and Celts celebrated, and takes it one step further: In the depths of our depravity and sin there is hope for creation. At the foot of the cross look for resurrection, in the depths of the tomb look for new life.

We see the same thing in John the Baptist in our Gospel reading today. John comes baptizing. People come from all over, such that the authorities take notice. They are the guardians of the fragile peace between Judea and Rome. They have a stock in anything that draws a crowd! And so they accost John: "Who are you? By what authority do you do what you do?"

And John almost quotes Isaiah, and John's changes are significant. The words of Isaiah had their meaning in their day and in their context. And just like the Church with Christmas, John takes advantage of current symbols and meanings to give new meaning to old forms. Isaiah does not name the one who cries out, yet John says, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness...make a pathway for the Lord."

And John baptizes. Now John has already infused Baptism with new meaning. The Jews had been baptizing proselytes to the Jewish faith for perhaps 100 years. They were dipped in water, a symbol of cleansing, of washing away of one's Gentile unworthiness. On emerging they were marked with oil in the sign of the "Tao" the first letter of the word "Torah," For now they are "under Torah." But John is baptizing good upstanding Jews! In effect he is saying, "Unless you repent and prepare for the coming of the Lord, You are as good as Gentiles. Let me baptize you as a symbol of an inner conversion to what you already profess."

But even John does not claim his baptism as the ultimate form. "You wanna get baptized? The one coming after me will baptize you with fire!" Jesus takes it one step further. He is the one who will complete this whole line of images from Isaiah to now.

Advent is a time to go one step further. The Incarnation is at the center of our Christian understanding of Christmas. This is radically more than merely hope in the darkness. The midwinter festivals based their confidence in history. Spring had always come before, so in the depths of winter, on the shortest day, we can take comfort in our experience. Spring will warm the world again. And that is a valid assumption.

But our hope is rooted deeper. Even if something terrible happened and Spring never returned, yet we know that there is always hope, because in the midst of our winter we have not just a memory, but an event: God, the very ground of all hope, appears among us.

"Appear" is the right word. The fact is in creation God has always been present. Our existence is impossible without God. God's active involvement is required. So God has always been here... Now we see it for what it really is. The God of love seeks to show that God is among us and seeks a relationship with us. To make that wondrous truth manifest God becomes one of us.

I have been going over to the Roberts' house on Sunday afternoons. Dave Roberts has been teaching me to play with mud! It's tremendously fun. But when I think of the clay in my hands, centering on the wheel, drawing up, pushing out, folding in, thinning and forming, the idea that has lived in my own head for some time takes form. (Or, rather, I give it my feeble attempts to render it into the form in my head!) But nonetheless, a part of me is expressed in the form of the clay. I have infused the clay with something of myself and the clay has taken on the form of that part of me.

It's a messy and incomplete comparison, but you could say that God's great Potter's Wheel is before the divine throne. God has rolled up the divine sleeves and thrown clay onto the wheel. Now, with magnificent skill and patience, the divine Heart is being made manifest, first in celebrations of hope, and then, in the form of the perfect rendition of the Father's heart, Jesus. God has become incarnate among us, and shown us that we, too, bear that image, marred and blurred, by all means, by sin and selfishness, yet nonetheless there where we can find it if we just pay attention to the work of the potter's hands.

In 14th century Germany a mystic, theologian and teacher appeared. Meister Eckhart is one of the greats of this time of many great souls. He said that the work of the Holy Spirit is to have Christ born within us. It is only as we welcome the Christ born within us, that we will recognize him when he is born among us. Advent, then, is about recognizing the hands of the potter in ourselves and in others, loving the heart that inspires them, and showing that love by the way we love one another and the world.