

Giving Birth to Hope
Luke 1:26 – 38, 46 – 55
Sunday, December 2, 2018

Almost 100 years ago, in the year 1919, William Butler Yeats wrote a poem called “The Second Coming.”

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

What does that mean? Yeats was Irish, and he wrote this poem in the wake of World War I, when violence and death on a scale that the world had never seen consumed Europe. Around 40 million people had died, and people were trying to make sense out of this. So Yeats looked at the world around him and saw *chaos*. He gives this image of the falcon and the falconer; the falconer stands on the ground while the falcon flies in circles above him, and the falcon is supposed to stay close enough to hear the falconer’s commands and be able to return to him. But Yeats has the falcon’s circles getting wider and wider until it has flown so far away that it cannot hear the falconer’s voice anymore. So either, in the wake of this Great War, we have flown so

far away from God that we cannot hear God's voice anymore, or *we* are the falconer and we have unleashed something on the world that we can no longer control.

Yeats says, "things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." The world has descended into chaos. And while there are good people in the world, the *best* of them, Yeats says, "lack all conviction, while the *worst* are full of passionate intensity." A hundred years ago, but not all that different from how the world feels today.

So Yeats looks at all of this, and he says, "This must be a sign that some kind of *change* is coming to the world; some kind of *revelation* is at hand. All of this chaos and violence and suffering and death must mean that the Second Coming is at hand." But, he says, the Second Coming of *what*? Of *Christ*? Or of *more* violence and suffering and death? Are things going to get *better*, or are things going to keep getting *worse*?

He ends with this image of the Sphinx in Egypt, rising up out of the sand, and slowly making its way across the desert. And he says, "What rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?" He has this feeling that something really *bad* is about to be borne into the world (and this was the exact time that Hitler was beginning his rise to power in Germany).

Now, this is *not* a very hopeful poem! But the great thing about poetry is that you can find *meaning* in it and it can *speak to you* in ways that the author never intended but is nonetheless *valid*. For the past several months, this poem has been speaking to *me*, as we see the world around us becoming more and more chaotic and violent (mass shootings, racial and political

discord and violence), the center cannot hold (we have pushed ourselves to extremes), and things are falling apart.

And it is in *such a time as this* that we, as the Church, turn our focus to the Second Coming. Advent is not just about the way that Christ came 2,000 years ago. It is *also* about the anticipation of Christ coming *again*. And so *we* begin *our* slow journey to Bethlehem now. But sometimes, in the midst of the chaos of the world and of our lives, when we are not at peace and it's hard for us to be joyful or hopeful, when everything feels out of control, sometimes all we can do is *slouch* our way towards Bethlehem. Something *is* waiting to be borne into this world. Will it be another "rough beast?" Or will it be *something else*? And the question that is going to guide us through this season of Advent is, "How can *hope* and *peace* and *joy* and *love* be borne in the midst of chaos?"

We begin with Mary. Mary was a young woman, likely a teenager, who is *engaged* to be married, but she's not married *yet* when an angel visits her and tells her that she is pregnant with the Son of God. This would *not* have been good news for her. If her fiancée Joseph finds out about this, he knows that's not *his* baby, so he's going to think she was unfaithful to him, and he would be perfectly within his right according to Jewish law to break off the wedding or *have her killed*, because adultery was punishable by death.

Even if he *doesn't* have her killed, her life is basically over anyway because no man will ever want to *marry* her after that because they will think that she already *been* with another man and has been unfaithful to Joseph. So why would *they* trust her? She won't have anyone to *provide* for her (because in that time it was *very* rare for a woman to be able to support herself), so she will have to stay in her parents' house until *they* die, at which point she will likely be out on the

street, begging for a living until *she* dies. So Mary is facing the prospect of physical or social *death*. With this annunciation, her life has been thrown into total chaos.

And yet, look at how she responds. First with *acceptance* – “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” – and then with *singing*. “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor upon the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.” *Magnify, rejoice, favor, blessed* – where does *that* come from? Her life has just been turned completely upside down, and yet she is able to sing a song of praise to God. *How?*

It’s not about her *circumstances*, because her circumstances are *not good*. It’s about the *hope* that something *good* can come out of her circumstances. That in the midst of her anxiety and fear, God can still make a way for her through the chaos that her life has been thrown into. *That* is hope; the smallest possibility that keeps us going when there is absolutely no evidence that this is going to work out. Where does Mary find *that*?

I think the first place Mary finds hope is in the feeling that she is not in this chaos alone. The first thing the angel says to her is, “Greeting, favored one! *The Lord is with you.*” She is reassured that God is with her in this. Then, the angel tells her that her relative Elizabeth has *also* conceived a son.” And what is the very next thing that Mary does? She goes to see Elizabeth. Because something in her feels like, “We are in this together.”

When we find ourselves in the midst of chaos – whether it is our anxiety and fear over the chaos of the world around us; whether it is from a medical diagnosis, the loss of a job, the loss of a

relationship, whatever – one of the most powerful things that can keep us going is the feeling that we are not in this alone. That someone else is *with* me in this, at my side. That someone else understands what this is like and what I am going through. God became one of us in Jesus Christ and experienced the joy and wonder and love that is a part of being human, but Christ also experienced the pain and sadness and fear and loss that comes with being human. In Christ, God has experienced what *we* experience on a daily basis. We are not alone in this. God is with us, because God knows what it is like to face the things that we face. But God has *also* given us *each other*, this family of faith to walk alongside each other through the good and the bad. No matter what you are facing, there is someone else here who has faced it before. And part of our calling is to come alongside each other through the chaos of life and follow Christ’s way together. We can have *hope* because we are not in this chaos alone.

The *other* thing that gives Mary hope is that she is *overshadowed*. When she asks the angel, “How can this be,” the angel says to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.” To be *overshadowed* means that there is something *bigger* than you casting the shadow of their image upon you. And how does Mary start off her song? “My soul *magnifies* the Lord....” To *magnify* something is to make it *bigger*. In all of this is an awareness that *God is bigger* than her, *greater* than her, more *powerful* than her. That she does not have to control all of this or organize it or make it all work out, because the shadow of God’s image and God’s power is *all over this*.

When *we* find ourselves in the midst of chaos and everything feels like it is out of control, *hope* comes from the realization that, yes, perhaps this *is* out of my control. But there is One greater than me, more powerful than me at work in all of this. That doesn’t mean we just give up and sit back and say, “Jesus, take the wheel!” It doesn’t excuse us from *acting* and doing everything we

can to bring about transformation. But it is the awareness that transformation is ultimately *not up to us*. *That* is the work of the Holy Spirit. Our best efforts simply open us up to the transformation that God can bring about. Hope comes from the awareness that the shadow of God's image and power are all over this; that God has got this, especially when we don't.

So when the chaos and burdens of life are weighing down upon us to the point that all we can do is slouch our way through this season, know that you are not in this alone – that God is with you, and you are part of a family of faith that wants to walk through this with you, too. And let yourself be overshadowed by God's presence and power. When we do *that*, hope will be borne into the world through us, just like it was through Mary.