
Post-Party Presence

Isaiah 63:7-9

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 29, 2013 by the Rev. Dr. Carol Gregg

The party is over. Or perhaps I should say the parties (plural) are over. The celebrations of Christmas in their various forms have consumed a great deal of attention over the last month. For some, family gatherings, office parties, seasonal concerts, and annual traditions have filled life to full and perhaps overflowing. Here at the chapel, we had four wonderful worship services on Christmas Eve, all well attended. If the season of Advent was busy, then perhaps this Sunday after Christmas, may seem anticlimactic. While for some the season of Advent felt full, for others the season may have seemed empty because loneliness or grief were too often the companion; if that is the case for you, then perhaps you have felt left out of the party.

Either way, post-holiday blues is a common phenomenon. The hype of celebration is past. The season of postponing difficult decisions is over. Disappointment may creep in. A school in Canandaigua, N.Y., a small town in the Finger Lakes region, challenges this season of lows with the “Post-Christmas Blues Run”, a 5K race.¹ The race was yesterday and it started at 8:45 am. The temperature was in the high 30’s, which is warmer than normal. My guess is after those brave souls raced, they may not have been feeling sad, but they may have been blue from the cold!

Our scripture readings for today declare boldly that we have many reasons to rejoice, and they do so without flinching from the hard realities of life. The passages challenge the notion that we can only celebrate when life is pretty, calm, and painless. It is when we buy into this notion, often literally buy into it, that we crash when the party is over. The message of scripture points us to a deeper celebration.

In the lectionary text from Isaiah, the prophet speaks of God’s praiseworthy acts and the abundance of God’s steadfast love. In these few verses, Isaiah reminds the people of all that God has done in the past, not by reciting a litany of activities at this point, but rather by identifying the themes of divine grace, favor, mercy and love. He then goes on to declare that God “became their savior in all their distress.

¹ <http://www.canandaiguaschools.org/files/26546/post-christmas%20blues%20run%20application%202013.pdf>

It was no messenger or angel, but his presence that saved them.” (Isaiah 63:8b-9) These are beautiful and uplifting verses, which sound lovely to our ears.

Perhaps it is not surprising that the lectionary does not call us to read the verses which precede or follow these wonderful assurances.

The 63rd chapter of Isaiah opens with a vivid description of the triumphant return of the Divine Warrior. The poetry describes a majestic figure trampling Edom, which is the symbol of wicked, foreign enemies. The warrior tramples the enemies in anger to the point of being blood-stained. It is not a pretty picture.

The balance of this chapter and flowing into the next is a communal lament, in which rebellion, punishment and repentance are shown to characterize Israel’s relationship with God. The people have been faithless and are pleading once again with God, saying “Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.” (Isa 64:9) Given the image of the Divine Warrior, we can understand why the people would pray that God not be exceedingly angry. This lament, this communal confession, would not make good small talk at a party.

Between the image of the Divine Warrior and the communal lament, we have our reading for today. “And he became their savior in all their distress.” There is some scholarly debate about how to translate this verse due to variations in the ancient manuscripts.² We have read the New Revised Standard Version. The New International Version reads “so he became their Savior. In all their distress he too was distressed” while the New American Standard Bible prints, “So He became their Savior. In all their affliction He was afflicted”. (Isaiah 63:8-9) I am far from being a Biblical scholar and don’t doubt that God may be distressed or afflicted by our circumstances, but the notion that God became our Savior *in* all our distress, in the midst of our distress, seems to fit the context of the passage as a whole.

Fast forward and it certainly fits the birth of Jesus. In the gospel of Matthew, we learn that Jesus was born into a world ruled by tyrants. While he was still very young, his parents fled with him to Egypt because Herod, the king of Judea, declared that all the infants in Bethlehem should be killed; it was his attempt to kill the one who had been born king of the Jews. Given that Herod had his wife and sons killed out of a similar desire to maintain power, his ruthlessness is clear.³

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=808

³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/history/herod.shtml>

Could God have chosen a time to enter our world as a defenseless baby when life was perhaps less treacherous? Maybe a time of peace and prosperity? Certainly, but God chose to become flesh when Herod, violence, and power ruled. Jesus came into the midst of distress.

This is good news. We still live in a world in which tyrants rule, the lust for power is strong, and the innocent are killed, and yet God comes. We live in a world in which communities and families are fractured, and while we put on a good face for the holiday, God enters and is here when the brokenness resurfaces. Our own inner worlds are bruised by private pain, God comes. What good news: scripture illustrates that we do not have to have everything right before God graces our world! God comes to us in our distress and brokenness.

There is more good news from Isaiah. The prophet declares that “It was no messenger or angel, but his presence that saved them.” (Isaiah 63:9) God’s own presence. No substitute, no messenger, no emissary. God alone, out of love and pity, comes to redeem.

God’s own presence.

It can be difficult to discern the difference between what is real and imitation. Artificial Christmas trees can be lovely, synthetic gems are convincing, and dedicated skiers will take to the slopes whether the snow came from the sky or the snow-making machine. Sometimes it is not a major issue as to whether or not something is real, but at other times we go to great lengths to ensure authenticity. The redesigned \$100 bill, released in October of this year, includes two new security features: a 3-D security ribbon in the center and a color-changing bell in an inkwell.⁴ Obviously, there are many reasons to prefer a real \$100 bill over a counterfeit.

There is no substitute for God’s presence.

At Christmas, we celebrate God’s presence among us as a newborn baby, the one called Emmanuel, God-with-us. Jesus, born of Mary is no ordinary child, but instead is God-made-flesh, the divine born among us.

A curriculum we use in the Congregation tells the story of a Lutheran Bishop

⁴ http://www.newmoney.gov/stakeholder/media/release_10082013.htm

“standing behind an altar in a small crypt chapel of the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth in the Holy Land, supposedly at the location where Mary heard that she was going to have a baby. He saw some Latin words carved into the altar: Verbum caro factum est, "The Word was made flesh." But then he noticed that there was one other little word in Latin. That word: h - i - c. Hic. "Here." Verbum caro hic factum est, "The Word was made flesh here." Probably whoever authorized that inscription meant it to refer to that specific location, but in reality, the Incarnation means God became flesh here on earth, for all of us. The Incarnation means that we can speak of the ... the nearness of God.”

This nearness of God, the incarnation of God as the baby Jesus, is God’s authentic, real, living presence among us, even now.

The birth of God’s presence among us may point to a prayer that we no longer need. At meetings, at the dinner table, sometimes in worship, we pray that God would be among us. A familiar table grace begins “Be present at our table, Lord.” Such a prayer seems to assume that God is absent until we issue an invitation. If God is incarnate in Jesus, if God’s own presence comes among us, then God is already here. The prayer we need then is one which asks for help in recognizing the Divine among us.

Turning back to Isaiah, we see that not only that God’s presence has come to us in our distress and saved us, but also that God lifts us up and carries us. The prophet’s language and imagery points back to a conversation between Moses and God. Moses asked to see God’s ways and to be assured of God’s favor. The Lord “said, ‘My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.’ And Moses said to him, ‘If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here.’” (Ex 33:14-15) Moses saw that being carried by the Lord and the Lord’s presence were intertwined. We know the outcome of the Exodus; God did carry the people to freedom and to a new life.

Today, God does not carry and direct us by way of a pillar of cloud or of fire, but God’s presence does still carry us. The way I see that most often is within the community of faith. Because God is with us, we are bound together in community, and empowered to lift and carry each other.

Dr. van Deusen Hunsinger, writes in *Theology Today* of how God's presence in Jesus Christ draws us into community. She claims:

Jesus Christ ... joins the vertical and horizontal dimension of our life together, uniting us through the Spirit with God and one another. Because we belong to Jesus Christ, we belong to each other as well. In Christ, our relationships with each other become a means through which God cares for us and through which we grow in faith, hope and love. *Koinonia* describes the spiritual fellowship that is enjoyed by those who are knit together as one body. Various translations as "fellowship" or "communion," "partnership" or "community," it is the same word used by Paul when he speaks of the bread and cup being a participation (*koinonia*) in the body and blood of Christ. We live in Christ and Christ lives in us by virtue of the Spirit's mediation of Christ's living presence."⁵

God's presence, known to us in Jesus Christ, draws us together in community. Genuine community is that which celebrates together as well as mourns together. It is a place in which pretenses can be set aside, so that joy and pain are equally acknowledged. Here we can be real with each other because God is real to us. We are one interrelated body, bound together by Jesus Christ, whether we are in the midst of a spectacular Christmas Eve or we are relaxing once the party is over. Authentic Christian community is one way in which God's presence carries us – both to the heights of celebration and through the midst of distress.

It is Christmastime, and we have reasons to rejoice. The good news of the gospel is that God is with us. God has come to us where we are, in the midst of our real, sometimes distressing lives. And God will lift us up and carry us.

On this post-party Sunday, we have reason for deep celebration. God is with us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁵ Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, "Practicing *Koinonia*", *Theology Today*, p. 347, October 2009