

As you pick up your Bible, what do you expect to encounter—a window or a mirror? Do you anticipate looking through the words and images of the Bible to see a bygone era? A people and stories far removed from the day in which we live? A curiosity, certainly, and even entertainment, but primarily a means of looking back at the way things were—a window to the past? Or do you find in the Bible a mirror of yourself and the day in which we live? Making allowances for differences in culture and respective world views, do you encounter in the Bible's stories and words struggles and challenges similar to those that we know?

This morning we have sung the deeply moving Advent hymn, "O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel." Sensitive to the avenues of mutual respect between Christians and Jews that have opened in recent decades, some in the church have opted to put that hymn aside. And certainly, we should put it aside if in singing those words we are saying the faith of Israel has been superseded by the Christian faith and is no longer valid. If, however, the haunting words of that hymn are not just a window on a tragic time in Israel's history but a mirror to the tragic sense of incompleteness and waiting of our own time and place, we find ourselves to be companions with Israel in the journey of faith. Luke's story of the nativity gives us a key to interpreting our relationship.

Luke's first two chapters and the opening chapters of Matthew stand alone in Christian scripture in their stories of the birth of Jesus; so, the mere inclusion of the stories themselves sets the two Gospels apart. But Luke's inclusion of four canticles or four songs—the *Benedictus* of Zechariah, the *Magnificat* of Mary, the *Gloria in Excelsis* of the heavenly host and the *Nunc Dimittis* of Simeon—is unique. The songs' similarities to Jewish hymns of the preceding two centuries raise questions about whether Luke composed the songs himself, adapted them from Jewish writings or borrowed them from Jewish Christian sources. They are called the songs of the *Anawim*—the songs of the *Poor Ones*—and reflect a change in Israel's self-understanding perhaps originating in the Exile. Repeated invasions, deportations and plundering by the Babylonians had left Judah poor. An humbled remnant was all that remained. Recognizing that wealth and political power were no longer at its disposal, this faithful remnant saw itself as having no other source of strength, comfort or hope than placing its utter confidence in God. As we revisit these songs in the coming weeks of Advent, hear in their strains a longing, a waiting, a sense of incompleteness that reflects the incompleteness and tragedy of the world we know. Hear, too, the contrasting sounds of hope, love, joy and peace that speak of a God who comes to those who wait.

Israel's waiting is dramatized in the waiting of an aging couple for the birth of a child. In both cases, the wait had been so prolonged that hope itself must have seemed futile. The parabolic character of the story suggests itself in the person of Zechariah, whose name means "God has remembered." The announcement of the coming birth of John is a call to the renewal of hope, not just for Zechariah, but for all those who place their hope in God, including and not excluding Israel.

Note the continuity: The annunciation to Zechariah was made in the Temple at the burning of incense, to a priest, who was husband of one of the daughters of the priestly line of Aaron. Luke, who begins the story of Jesus in the Temple, also ends the story of Jesus in the Temple, placing the disciples following Jesus' death and resurrection "continually in the Temple, praising and blessing God" [24:53]. The new thing that God was doing in Christ was not about revoking the covenant of God's faithfulness to our Jewish cousins. It was about including us. With both the ancient poor of Israel and poor of our own day, we confess that the good news of the gospel is not about personal or ethnic or national or racial superiority. It is about hope in God.

God, we confess, chose the humble path of coming among us in the life of a baby born of the *Anawim*, the poor of the earth. Far from pretensions of grandeur, our appropriate response is to embody God's presence in the face of all that denigrates human life. This time of Advent is about waiting. It is about acknowledging all that holds us and the peoples of our world in captivity. It is about greed that runs roughshod over the basic human dignity of so many of God's children. It is about despotic rulers who terrorize the lives of their people. It is about school buildings that collapse in China and Haiti, taking the lives of innocent children and the deaths of innocents in the terrorist attacks in Mumbai, India. It is about societal priorities that override the basic needs of American children. Last week, Retired General Colin Powell, founder of America's Promise, a coalition of organizations speaking and acting on behalf of America's children, called attention to the fact that in our land of plenty, so many of our children are afflicted with poverty and lack access to health care and a meaningful education with only 58 percent of Hispanic students and 55 percent of African-American students graduating on time with a regular diploma. If we would be attentive to the future well-being of our nation, Powell insists, we must put the needs of our children first.

Someone has said that the birth of each new baby is the sign that God has not yet given up on the world. Each baby with its own unique gifts, calling and potential for untold good symbolizes hope that the child's life will be embraced by love and goodness so that it unfolds into the promise it portends.

We might also say that the best indication that we serve a God who came among us as a baby born to the *Anawim*, the poor, is the extent to which we invest our lives in bringing to birth the hope and promise of each and every child, particularly the child born into poverty. If we would keep Advent, we will place our hope in the Child and direct our best efforts in the care of all of God's children. In the words of Walter Brueggemann, "Bet on the baby. Get free of the coercive power of the empire. Then act differently about power and money and land and justice and homes and food and health care. Bet on the baby and notice the new world in which we live. . . . Bet on the baby and listen while the choirs in heaven and on earth sing: 'The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our

God and of his Christ" [Walter Brueggeman, *Pulpit Digest*, N-D 1990, 17].