Invitation to the Table

At some point during Advent and Christmas you have heard—or will hear—these words from Isaiah, "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given..." My friend and colleague, Jared Banks applies those words like this:

For unto us a child is born, so we will understand that we are all born connected, bound together by divine love.

For unto us a child is born, so no child should ever be called illegitimate, illegal, alien, vermin or abomination.

For unto us a child is born, so every child will be welcomed, loved, and affirmed; will know their divine value, their sacred worth, and holy purpose.

For unto us a child is born, so every child will know freedom, justice, hope, and love.

For unto us a child is born, so every child will experience life: abundant and eternal.

For unto us a child is born, to bless the fruit of every womb.

We gather at this Table to remember and celebrate the child whose birth we anticipate.

Our Communion Hymn is #420, *"I Come with Joy!"*

Pastoral Prayer

God, whose will is justice for the poor, whose heart aches for the afflicted, whose kingdom comes not in thunder but in a baby's cry—break through any pious indifference you find within us.

Shatter our shells of self-sufficiency with the reminders that even the Son of God came to us as a helpless baby and lived among us with no place to lay his head.

Prepare us to receive the One who comes to baptize not with sentiment, but with Spirit and fire—shake loose any complacency, burn away any illusion that we can meet you on our own terms.

Turn our hearts from nostalgia to anticipation,
from despair to hope,
from fear to faith.

Where there is oppression, strengthen us to sow your justice.
Where there is conflict, give us courage to kindle your peace.
Where there is division, teach us the risk and joy of reconciliation.

We ask this not in vague hope but in bold trust, through the One whose coming is certain, whose day draws near—Jesus, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Foolishness of Faith

Isaiah 35:1-6 (NRSVUE)

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad;
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus [2] *it shall blossom abundantly*
and rejoice with joy and shouting.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God.
[3] *Strengthen the weak hands*
and make firm the feeble knees.
[4] *Say to those who are of a fearful heart,*
"Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you."
[5] *Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,*
and the ears of the deaf shall be opened;
[6] *then the lame shall leap like a deer,*
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

***

LUKE 1:46-55 (NRSVUE)

And Mary said,
"My soul magnifies the Lord,
[47] *and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,*
[48] *for he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant.*
Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed,
[49] *for the Mighty One has done great things for me,*
and holy is his name;
[50] *indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him*
from generation to generation.
[51] *He has shown strength with his arm;*
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
[52] *He has brought down the powerful from their thrones*
and lifted up the lowly;
[53] *he has filled the hungry with good things*
and sent the rich away empty.
[54] *He has come to the aid of his child Israel,*
in remembrance of his mercy,
[55] *according to the promise he made to our ancestors,*
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

***

The Word of God for the people of God!

I think it's fair to say that most folks come to church expecting to be confirmed in their faith, made more secure in their beliefs. It's not the norm for people to come to church excited about discovering something new. A satisfying response to a sermon is something like, "Yep, that's what I've always thought."

Most modern people live with a transactional, cause-effect, reduced world view. Most of us, some of the time, and some of us, most of the time, prefer simple, direct, easy answers to complex problems: "It all boils down to…"

But every time we open the Bible and read and ponder, we move into a wider, more complex view of the world. That's nowhere more evident than at Advent. Advent proclaims that our world has not been left to its own devices. There's more.

Advent says simple answers aren't always enough. We've seen denominations divide in anger over sexuality and gender orientation; congregations shrink and communities wrestle with political polarization. Many churches retreat into "safe" policies and comfortable liturgies; many pastors choose the role of Chaplain over Prophet.

But safety and comfort only make the church irrelevant because it fails to be God's voice addressing complex realities that defy simple answers. There's more.

The church is called to prophetic witness, and its survival and health depend on its willingness to be courageous; to face hard truths about its own accountability in racism and human exploitation. A silent church is a dying church; a prophetic church is a living church.

And yet, did you really listen to the verses Nolan read? While the prophetic church is called to confront abuses of power and to advocate for righteousness, justice, and peace, there's more: it also is called to speak hope and peace and joy and love to those who suffer from injustice.

In a time of uncertainty about Judah's future, Isaiah sings glad songs of restoration. "The wilderness and dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom," the blind shall see, the deaf hear, the lame dance, and the speechless will sing. The whole world, groaning in pain and desolation, will burst forth in liberation. …all these wonderful metaphors just line up in a parade of joy and gladness!

And there's more: note that God's shalom embraces the non-human as well as the human. All creation joins in a symphonic harmony of interdependence. As Paul notes in today's Epistle reading, the whole creation groans as in the pangs of giving birth—the whole creation. Irresponsible stewardship of the earth and human oppression mirror each other, each originate in the same spirit of chaos and evil.

In contrast, Isaiah sees a world created and sustained in the Spirit in which

The wolf shall live with the lamb;
the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
the calf and the lion will feed together,
and a little child shall lead them.

A world obsessed with simple answers to complex questions will judge Isaiah's vision as foolish; but it's the foolishness of faith that motivates Isaiah. He speaks through the Spirit of the Creation narratives—the same Spirit that brooded like a mother hen over the face of the waters when the earth was formless chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, the same Spirit that spoke light into existence and brought order out of chaos, the same Spirit that created the earth and calls humanity to love the Earth and live simply; to make love not ownership our goal, the same Spirit that still speaks through the prophets, calling humanity to resist consumerism and individualism; to oppose intentional policies that destroy advocacy for the poor; and to practice responsible stewardship of the earth.

The incorporation of Isaiah into our Advent preparation isn't for the passive; it's a call to active partnership with that same Spirit's work of healing. In Advent the foolishness of faith imagines a new age – an age of Shalom – despite the realities of war, racism, homophobia, Islamophobia, sexism, xenophobia, and polarization. Even the non-human world, contaminated and dishonored by human convenience and greed, will rejoice and blossom.

In every age that dream of Shalom seems foolish, but in Advent, Isaiah's foolishness of faith calls us to see more and to expect more, calling us to a hope that distinguishes us from both the despairing who believe nothing can change, and the self-sufficient, who believe they can get it done.

In today's Gospel reading, Mary expresses the interplay of her unexpected pregnancy and that same Spirit's preferential option for the poor and dispossessed:

> ***He has brought down the powerful from their thrones***
> ***and lifted up the lowly;***
> ***he has filled the hungry with good things***
> ***and sent the rich away empty.***

To realize the dream will require more than lockstep plans of salvation while passively waiting for God to break in and fix everything for us or to take us away from it all. Isaiah calls us to a hope based on the realization that the same Spirit that brooded over creation poured itself into flesh and blood to demonstrate its radical unity with humanity; there is no difference between divine life and human life, between spirituality and tangible life. That Spirit is still present, ready to empower humans in the partnership of restoring the broken, healing the sick, and welcoming the outcast in that same world.

In a later time, another witness will look back and confirm God's determination to redeem and sustain the link between creator and creation: ***"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and God was the Word. … And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."*** (JOHN 1:1, 14) The Spirit that brooded over creation becomes flesh, so determined is God to be God with us as one of us—not as an abstract idea or vague spiritual presence, but flesh-and-blood in Jesus of Nazareth.

And there's more. That same witness declares, ***"For God so loved the world*** (and the word in the original language is 'cosmos') ***that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the cosmos to condemn the cosmos but in order that the cosmos might be saved through him."***

What is overlooked so often is that cosmic dimension—that 'Gospel in a nutshell, as Luther called it, is reduced to an individualistic, "me-and-Jesus" thing, a reductionism that fuels a disconnect with the world's population as a whole and rationalizes irresponsible stewardship of the earth.

In Luke, three chapters after Mary's song in today's reading, that fetus in her womb has grown up and makes his first public appearance in the Synagogue in Nazareth, his hometown. He reads from Isaiah:

> "***The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,***
> ***because he has anointed me***
> ***to bring good news to the poor.***
> ***He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives***
> ***and recovery of sight to the blind,***

to set free those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

It was a familiar passage. The people knew it. It was understood to be part of the promise of a Messiah that had emerged in the years following Babylonian exile. The people expected Jesus to give the traditional teaching: God will send a hero—a warrior/king—who will overthrow Israel's oppressor—originally the Persians, then the Greeks, then the Romans… 600 years later the people were still waiting.

That's what they expected to hear; but Jesus put a different spin on it: he said, in essence, "We are the ones we've been waiting for; we are the fulfillment of the promise!"

The people didn't want to hear that; didn't want to do the hard work of reconciliation and healing. They got so mad they ran him out of town—almost killed him.

Advent's foolishness of faith is that another world is possible: the desert can bloom; lives can be restored through a patient partnership in which God takes the initiative and empowers us to be innovative. Our partnership is the extension of the incarnation of God's vision of Shalom in our world. God is with us now and urges us to act with grace and persistence for the well-being of the world God loves.

The people in Nazareth weren't ready to hear that; weren't ready to enter into that divine/human partnership. Are we ready?

Pray with me.