

Space for the Uncontained God

Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11 & Luke 1: 47-55

Third Sunday in Advent/ 11th December 2005

Allow me to tell you about Justin, a sophisticated intellectual, a student of life, a remarkable thinker and debater, a philosopher. He was surrounded by bright, civilized people who, like him (and like us) were interested in truth, the meaning of life, and the nature of the good, how to live. First and foremost he had a hunger for God, not just knowledge *about* God, but a hunger *to know God*, that is *to participate and live in God*, God's being. So he went from philosopher to philosopher to find the truth. First he went to a Stoic philosopher, but after listening to him speak, he learned nothing about God.¹ In fact, his mentor seemed bored with the subject, and because one cannot know that which one does not ultimately care about, he moved on. He met a follower of Aristotle (384-322, B. C.), but all he would talk about were fees. Justin moved on to a Pythagorean, who cared mostly about mathematical theorems and little for God. Eventually, he encountered a student of Plato (427- 347, B. C.) and said he was finally making progress. But one day he was walking on a beach and started talking with an old man about Plato. As they talked he could hear something else in his voice. Unlike Plato, who believed that the soul is immortal and has life in itself, the old man said the soul's life is a wondrous gift of God, the source of all life. Justin said this was new. "Who taught you this?" he asked. The old man said before Greek philosophers there were prophets. And in contrast to the philosophers who relied chiefly on demonstration and debate to arrive at the truth, the prophets spoke about what they had seen and heard and were "witnesses to the truth." Justin was amazed that the old man didn't try to convince him of the truth, didn't engage him in debate, didn't try to tell him he was right or wrong. Their talk ended with the old man praying that the "gates

¹ Stoicism is a school of philosophy founded (308 B. C.) in Athens by Zeno of Citium (c. 364-265 B. C.). It teaches self-control and detachment from distracting emotions, sometimes interpreted as an indifference to pleasure or pain. This allows one to be a clear thinker, levelheaded and unbiased. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stoicism>.

of light” would be opened and Justin would be receptive. Justin couldn’t get this man’s words and approach out of his mind. Justin wrote, “A flame was kindled in my soul and I was seized by love of the prophets and of the friends of Christ. While I was pondering his words in my mind, I came to see that this way of life alone is sure and fulfilling.”²

Justin was born in 100 in Roman Palestine, lived in Rome, became a Christian at age 30 and died a martyr in Rome in 165 because he refused to venerate the gods of Rome. Justin, known as Justin the Martyr was an ardent defender of the Christian way; his writings continue to shape the life of the church. Being a martyr doesn’t mean to suffer and die for the faith – it could mean that, but it doesn’t have to. To be a martyr is to be a witness – that’s what it means – to be a witness as in a court where truth itself is on trial and the truth on trial is Jesus. What shook the foundations of Justin’s philosophically-oriented world was the realization that truth is not an idea, but a *person*, and truth is known not through debate, but through *encounter*. And when one encounters the holiness of God all one can do is give testimony, to share your experience, to tell others. The God of Judaism and Christianity is known through events that take place in history. In his book *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God*, Robert Louis Wilkin, who teaches at the University of Virginia, reminds us that “when speaking of how God is known, the Bible seldom speaks of insight or illumination or demonstration; rather, it says that God appeared, did something, showed himself, or spoke to someone...., the way to God begins not with arguments or proofs but with discernment and faith . . .” You see, the “Word of God makes its way not by argument but as men and women bear witness to what happened.”³ This was completely new for many Romans and Greeks.

Do you know what else was new? The discovery that the way to knowledge was through love. Note Justin’s response to the old man, he

² Justin Martyr, *Dialogues with Trypho*, cited in Robert Louis Wilkin, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 6. This account of Justin’s journey is found in Wilkin, pp. 5ff.

³ Wilkin, p. 7.

said he was set ablaze by the fire that breaks from God and was “seized by love.” Love seizes him and fires his heart and mind. Several centuries later, Augustine (354-430) wrote that it is love that “sets us on fire” and “lifts us” to God, which leads Wilkin to make the trenchant comment that “Only when wounded by love can one know the God of the Bible.”⁴

Justin, like countless others, was seized by love when he read the prophets and, as he put it, “the friends of Christ,” meaning the gospels. He realized something different was going on here, the prophets were pointing to the God who stands behind the texts and acts in history. This is what we have in the prophets and the gospels, in all of scripture: testimony, witness, an account of Yahweh’s actions in the world. This is true for the author of Second Isaiah and for Mary: they are witnesses to the grace of God. It’s there right at the beginning of Isaiah 61, “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because he has anointed me....” See, God making the first move, coming upon us, and then causing things to take place. Mary echoes this, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” who seized her in love so that through her all generations might witness the grace of God.

Isaiah is gripped by the presence of God and is compelled to announce what God is about to do for his exiled people in one of the most far-reaching, hopeful passages in scripture. It’s the very text of Jesus’ first sermon in the temple, marking the beginning of his own ministry in Luke 4, which means that this is pretty important and we better pay attention. This is what God does: brings good news to the oppressed, binds up the broken-hearted, proclaims liberty to the captives; and release to the prisoners, proclaim the Lord’s jubilee, heals all those who mourn, so that people would be strong again and have homes and cities to live in instead of ruins and devastation. And then it can’t be any clearer for us to hear: “For I the LORD love justice, and I hate robbery and wrongdoing.” We use this word, “justice,” a lot around the church, but need to be clear what it

⁴ Wilkin, p. 6. The Augustine quotations are from *Confessions*, 13.9.10, cited in Wilkin, p. 6.

means. Justice in scripture, related to the word “righteousness,” speaks not of retribution and getting even. An “eye for an eye,” as Gandhi (1869-1948) said, “leaves the whole world blind”. Instead, the Bible understands justice as the healing of relationships, a way of being that binds up the broken-hearted and brings people home. It’s very easy to identify the work of God in the world. Where these things listed in Isaiah 61 are happening God is there, and when people and institutions resist or hinder this, then they are working against God.

The same message is powerfully reinforced in Mary’s Song in Luke 2. Mary encountered the same God Isaiah talked about, they’re witnessing the same experience of the holy. These are extraordinary claims for Mary to make, then and now, because they overturn the balance of power, they subject all earthly authorities to the authority of God, they identify and anchor God’s salvation in the lives of God’s people, not in a spiritual way (which is a foreign category to scripture), but in a tangible, physical way. Through this one who is about to be born, Mary tells us, the proud and haughty will be scattered; he will bring down the powerful from their thrones and put the lowly ones there instead. The coronation of the children sitting on the thrones of Narnia comes to mind.⁵ Indeed, can you imagine this text being circulated throughout the Roman Empire? The one to be born is coming for the hungry ones, not those who are satisfied, not for the rich, for they will be disappointed to know the poor are favored. This one will witness to the mercy shown to Israel and fulfill the promise made to Abraham, “I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Genesis 12:2-3)”. The claims and promises of scripture’s God are unsettling, troublesome, disturbing, and disruptive. As one of our church school teachers said to me recently, “We let third graders read this stuff?” These are not tame texts and neither is the claim of Christmas.

⁵ C. S. Lewis (1898-1963), *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

Which makes me wonder why we're arguing in the public square over whether decorated evergreens should be called holiday trees or Christmas trees? And why is Bill O'Reilly on FoxNews all bent out of shape because certain stores won't allow their employees to say, "Merry Christmas"? Is there really a war against Christmas? Is it under attack in our society? I don't think the Left is trying to destroy Christmas and neither is the Right the steward of the season. There's no doubt every year we decry the commercialization. An organization formed back in 1973 to protest the commercialization of Christmas renamed the public holiday, *Consumas*. *Consumas* and Christmas don't occupy the same period, but overlap. One begins on Black Friday and ends officially on 26th December, whereas Christmas doesn't start until the 25th and ends on the 6th January. Black Friday after Thanksgiving was as black as ever with fights breaking out in Wal-Mart and Target. What does an Xbox 360 have to do with Jesus? I'm not quite sure. We haven't changed and this isn't anything new. When Charles Schulze wrote, "A Charlie Brown's Christmas" or Dr. Seuss gave us the story of "The Grinch," the message was clear that Christmas cannot be bought. That was forty years ago and we're still learning. But the American economy hopes we don't take this message too seriously because Wall Street and our pensions and portfolios count on Christmas or the holidays being financially lucrative.

But whose fault is all of this? It's not the media or a particular political party. Maybe it's the church's fault. If the church is really the keeper of Christmas (it is *our* story, after all), then maybe we should do something about it, speak out, take a stand. How about celebrating Christmas once every two years, like the Olympics, or every five? (Maybe you're think I'm crazy.) Then it might mean more for Christians and it might get the message across to the rest of the society what Christmas really is and what it isn't. Maybe this is a way for us to separate the true meaning of the message from the nostalgia and tradition and sentimentalism drowning the message and hindering us from witnessing what Mary gave birth to, what God gave birth to, what God is trying to continuously give birth to the world.

I'm not trying to sound like Scrooge or the Grinch or Mr. Potter in "It's a Wonderful Life." Truth is, I'm a very nostalgic person and I'm a sentimental sap. I love tradition. I love the past. I'm just trying to find a way to be faithful. Years ago, when I was at seminary, I did a Greek word-study of Luke's birth narrative in chapter two that changed my life. The King James Version said of the shepherds that they were "sore afraid." I discovered the Greek is actually *kai ephobethesan phoban megan* (Luke 2:9), literally, "and they became afraid with very much great fear." They were terrified. Language strains to capture the awe, the fear, the terror that come when facing mystery, the wonder the shepherds encountered Christmas Eve; words cannot capture the significance, the intensity of the moment. Sure, the angels said, "Fear not." But first there was awesome fear. It is an example of what the religion scholar Rudolph Otto (1869-1937) once called the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*: a terrifying and fascinating mystery that seizes us and overwhelms us in love.⁶ That's what Isaiah knew, and Mary, and the shepherds. That's what we should be paying attention to and that's what the church should be cultivating in the culture, within ourselves.

I've been thinking that perhaps the great sin regarding Christmas is not commercialization or even secularization (where did we ever get the idea that the secular was bad or a threat – all the world belongs to God), but *domestication*, that is we have domesticated the message, made it comfortable and safe, prettified it, tamed it, contained it, put it in a box wrapped with a nice ribbon and put it under some sort of evergreen, whatever you want to call it. But, like Aslan of Narnia, it cannot be tamed. The birth of God in Jesus is a mystery that overwhelms reason and thought, cannot be demonstrated or argued. It must be experienced with holy fear and awe. Before Jesus angels veil their faces and shepherds fall to their knees in praise. Awe. Awe before the Holiness of God, whose glory that cannot be tamed or contained chooses to dwell within humanity to

⁶ Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923; 2nd ed., 1950, [*Das Heilige*, 1917]).

in hidden, finite inwardness,
nine months of Eternity; to contain
in slender vase of being,
the sum of power –
the narrow flesh,
the sum of light,
 Then bring to birth,
push out into air, a Man-child
needing, like any other,
milk and love –

but who was God.

That's the mystery that calls us to fall on our knees in holy fear and
awe, in praise and adoration.

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