

John 3: 16-17

God in the World

Sunday December 4, 2011

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This month our worship theme is incarnation. That is a fancy word for God is with us. Incarnate means in the flesh. Now the concept of incarnation is a mystery – as Heike told us last week. It is a concept in Christianity that is hard to understand. We believe that Jesus had a quality of Godliness about him which was so strong people said he was the Son of God. But they also said in those days that Alexander the Great was the Son of God. Was that just an old fashioned way of saying this man is powerful? Did Jesus start out human and then morph into God over time? Did God come to earth like Superman? Was the Jesus persona God's Clark Kent identity, but when Jesus needed a miracle like loaves and fishes to be multiplied did the true nature of God come out? The truth is nobody knows for sure exactly what it means that God came to us and dwelled among us. God was in Jesus of Nazareth.

But this notion that God is not stuck up in heaven is what sets Christians apart from other faiths and religions. We are the only ones that think God is here with us. Incarnation is a powerful idea. But incarnation is also a confusing idea. It means that God lives in Jesus long ago, but that there is a living God among us now every day. That is why I say each week – May the Living Christ go with you. That is not just a lovely sentiment, but a statement of faith. Though we hear it each week, it is a stretch. If we are honest, we are not really sure. If God is really with us, then why can't we see God more easily? If God is really here why don't we who belong to the church hear God's voice when we pray? Do you have to be a walking saint to hear God? Do you have to have a life-threatening illness to see God? Do you have to pray all the time to be aware of God? If God is only available in extreme situations how helpful is that?

Does anybody we can relate to see God on a daily basis? Does God stay at convents or shrines, or is God also here in the suburbs? Where is the evidence that God really exists in the world today?

Now, the season of Advent is a good time to be searching for God. During Advent we prepare to hear the news that God has come into the world. In fact we prepare again to hear a story that we already know by heart. But we get ready to hear it as though it were the first time. God came in the body of a baby who was born to a humble family in Bethlehem. God came to a world that was not expecting God to look like this. God came at a time when Mary and Joseph were turned away from all the inns and Mary was forced to give birth in a barn. The manger where she lay this child – God incarnate – was a feeding trough for cattle. That is what a manger is. And if that were not enough irony, the story says that no one smart or savvy recognized that Jesus was God's own child, except these lowly shepherds at the bottom of the pecking order, and very strange wise men. But the whole birth of God in bodily form was off the radar screen of normal folks. They missed it all.

The fact that most people missed this miracle gives one pause. It makes you wonder. If we had been living in Bethlehem 2000 years ago- would we have noticed that someone special was born in the barn beside our hotel? Would we have seen that band of shepherds? Would we have thought it odd that wealthy Persian Star Gazers were lingering around the stable? Would we have listened when those angel choirs burst into song out over the fields, or would we have rolled over and put the pillow on our heads?

If God came then but most people missed it all, what is to say that God is not here now, but we just can't see God? Let us look at a story from the news this year and see if there is any evidence at all that God might be at work in the world.

One year ago on December 18, 2010 –a wave of protests rocked the Arab World. It started in Tunisia, where rural farmers found they had a lot in common with labor organizers in the cities. They

were all fed up with police corruption. So they did something no one expected. They staged major protests in the public square. Something amazing happened in Tunisia; the people did not get mowed down by the military. The government listened. Then in Egypt young adults, urbane and cosmopolitan but fed up with the Mubarek's old guard went into the square to protest. They set up facebook pages and their protests went viral as they protested Mubarek's hegemony. Something amazing happened. Some people were killed but not as many as you would think- given the upheaval these young men and women were fomenting. Mubarek relented. Through the spring the movement spread to Algeria, and Jordan, Yemen, and Iraq. No one had planned or even foreseen this kind of populist uprising against governments that had controlled Northern Africa and the Middle East for decades. The oddest thing of all was that many of these repressive regimes, not shy about using violence in the past or silencing dissidents - did not respond as violently as we might expect. In Jordan King Abdullah brought in new governments twice – 1 person killed. In Sudan the president announced he won't seek re-election – 1 killed. In Mauritania – 1 killed. In Oman the sultan admitted corruption and brought a new government – 4 killed. In Saudi Arabia King Abdulla made concessions including a plan to allow women to vote in 2015 – 2 killed. In Kuwait the government resigned – no one was killed. In Morocco the government concession – 1 killed. In Algeria the lifted a 19 year state of emergency – 8 killed. In Iraq the president won't seek re-election- 35 people killed. In Bahrain economic concessions and political prisoners released – 51 killed. In all 16 governments collapsed in 10 months. If you eliminate Syria and Libya where many lives were lost, 14 of the most repressive governments in the world were toppled by popular demand and less than 3000 lives were lost. In Yemen the president resigned after 33 years and populist leader Tawakel Karman is being mentioned for the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize.

Who could have predicted that in one less than one year 16 governments would be completely changed or toppled in the Middle East? Who could have predicted that regimes- so well entrenched would have been persuaded to make change, to share power or give it up entirely? Whenever people

face their fears but bravely find concrete ways to make changes I believe it is a sign that God has taken human form and is at work in the world.

The incarnation makes Christians different from all other people. No other religions believe that God came in bodily form to live in the life of a person. That idea is unique to us. So it matters that we believe God can come in the form of a person. If our faith is more than an old legend it should make a difference that God is really in the world today. Here and now – God is among us. But where? How do you know for sure?

What distinguished the followers of Jesus was that they believed that God was alive. God was with them. The more they realized that God was not locked in the past or stuck up on a cloud. God walked on the road to Emmaus. God made breakfast for the disciples. God spoke through visitors and strangers, and friends. All you had to do was look. Did you ever wonder why people did not wake up on Dec. 25 or whatever day it was in Bethlehem, and say one to another – Did you hear the news. God was born in a stable not far from here. Let's go and see this thing. Why didn't more people realize that morning that God had come among us? Why did people miss the miracle? They were not looking. You cannot find something you are not ever looking for. God is born in our midst every day. But you cannot see it if you never look.