

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” CHRISTMAS MIDNIGHT

Isaiah 9: 1-6 Psalm 96 Titus 2: 11-14 Luke 2: 1-14

by Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The shepherds, we are told, were keeping “night watch” over their flocks. That’s what it can feel like, being a believer in today’s world.—darkness all around and the call to duty, to watch and protect what is vulnerable and valuable. We search for and practice: peace in an increasingly hostile world; forgiveness when others hold grudges; simplicity while all around us there is spending and accumulating; concern for the needy whom society marginalizes and government policies neglect; frugality while our nation uses resources as if there were no tomorrow. We keep “night watch.”

Isaiah also used a light/darkness theme as he described his world, “A people who walked in darkness...those who dwelt in the land of gloom.” In today’s world, the preacher has many examples of “the land of gloom” in which we dwell. We are talking about serious darkness here, not the transitory blues we feel for a day or two; not the “downer” caused by too many days in the house because of rain or snow. Midnight mass provides an excellent backdrop for a preaching about light and darkness. The darkness isn’t just about lowering lights, it is symbolic, both for the world outside the church and the interior world within us, where light and darkness constantly go at it head to toe. Who’s going to win? A valid question, for there certainly is enough evidence in our world to bet on darkness having the final word. But another word interrupts our downward-spiral thinking; it is the Word. This evening the light is born into darkness and the darkness will never put it out. We believers join the angels in the gospel who praise God for the light that guides us out of despair into hope, “Glory to God in the highest....”

On our own, we certainly don’t have the light we need to navigate the night darkness. When Isaiah looked around, the first thing he saw was darkness---- and then a light. Where does this light come from? In the Isaiah passage, the prophet shifts from describing the gloom of the human condition to addressing the light’s source---God. “You have brought them [the people in the “land of gloom”] abundant joy and great rejoicing.” What exuberant rejoicing there is at this news, the kind that happens after great effort and struggle--- at harvest time and after a

victorious battle.

Who else could cause such a reversal of fortunes, but God? God is not a God of half measures, small victories. Every evil---the trampling boot, the blood stained cloak---all will be burned in the fire of God's justice. How did God accomplish this mighty and total deed? What great power did God choose? A series of "smart bombs"? Laser guided missiles? Stealth bombers? No! Surprise of surprises, the tenor of the Isaiah reading makes a dramatic shift and points to tonight's festival, "For a child is born to us...." God's power will be manifested through this child, who will be a wise leader ("Wonder-Counselor"); help us in our battle against evil ("God-Hero"); and promote and protect the peace ("Prince of Peace). These were the attributes of the Dravidic king. The angels announce the birth of this descendent of David, the promised messiah.

Luke makes it very clear that the arrival of the hoped-for messiah is not merely an idea that has reached maturity or the giving of a new code for living. No, this savior is flesh and blood, born in a very specific time, during the rule of the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus when the house of David and all Israelites were in subjugation. God didn't come to our world in a cloud or a spectacular light show. Instead, God was born to an insignificant family forced to travel away from home by the decree of the reigning world power. God took flesh among a suffering and insignificant people. As it was then, so it is now! God has identified with the outsider, the displaced and the subjugated. In fact, the birth of this descendent of David is first made known to and celebrated by outsiders, the shepherds. Nevertheless, as humble as these events are, Luke makes it known that the angels and heavenly hosts are a sign that this is an extraordinary event for all people.

The preacher has an option here. On the one hand we can stress the lowly aspects of Jesus' birth and show how God's presence can be found in the less spectacular and daily events of our lives. Where shall we look for our Christmas-God in the flesh? Where the outcasts and refugees are; where the displaced family searches for shelter; where those subjected to political force and whim are fleeing. Or, the preacher might emphasize the greatness of this child, the one in whom God's glory is found. We should not be deceived by humble appearances and the seeming insignificance of humble disciples and good people of all faiths. They may lack worldly or ecclesiastical status, but they may indeed be the very place we meet the magnificence of God. On them, "God's favor rests."

There are many symbolic details in Luke's very familiar and loved narrative. There are powerful messages in this initial narrative that will unfold throughout this gospel. The modern hearers should not be lulled by what sounds quaint and "cute." Nor should the preacher get carried away romanticizing this story--- the seeming picturesque details--- the crib scene with its domesticated animals, the idealized shepherds in the fields, the angelic hosts etc., can set hearers up for disappointment in their own celebration and application of this feast. People are liable to feel left out of Christmas since their own lives don't seem to be put together as neatly as the Christmas scene. Even "normal" families, without a present crisis in their lives, having just been through the Christmas rush and chaos, find themselves exhausted as Christmas arrives. For most Christians, our Christmas scenes will not look like the ones on the Christmas cards taped to doors and window frames.

However, a closer look at the Lucan infancy narrative reveals the disruption and discomfit in the story: the suspect pregnancy; the couple forced to travel close to the expected birth date and an awkward setting for the delivery. These details show what will be true in Jesus' life. There is no room in the inn and this foretells that he will be rejected. The shepherds, the lowest class of people in this society, are the first to hear about his birth; Jesus will spend his life reaching out to the outcast. The manger was the place food was placed for the animals; this evening's eucharistic celebration will feed us with food for travelers, the displaced and those who hunger for God's peace in their lives. If we tell the story as Luke is telling, we will speak to those present who feel like outsiders and are having trouble keeping the loose ends of their lives from unraveling.

The preacher would be more faithful to the underlying stress in Luke's narrative by addressing the Gospel message to our own modern displacements and darkness, for in these places the savior is born and new life is possible. As we prepare this preaching we should let our imaginations look out at the congregation and see who is out there, both among the regulars and the rare holiday returnees. Many have experienced a recent death, marital strains, infirmed parents, a financial downturn, a sick child, serious medical procedures, a grown child who has stopped going to church, etc. A neatly packaged Christmas scene and a preaching that promotes that illusion, only serves to put distance between the gospel narrative and the daily realities our hearers face.

CHRISTMAS CARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a Christmas card (**it's not too late!!**) to one or more of them to let them know that we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty." Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

Ricky Cagle #0061528 (On death row since 6/15/95)

James L. Morgan, Jr. # 0291861 (7/8/99)

Perrie D. Simpson #0371096 (2/1/93)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

JUSTICE NOTES

(Christmas has a lot to do with children. Here is a statement about Children and the Environment)

A JOINT REFLECTION BY THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF SYNAGOGUES
AND THE BISHOPS' COMMITTEE FOR ECUMENICAL AND
INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS (NOVEMBER 20, 2000)

As Catholic and Jewish religious leaders, we wish to express our concern over environmental health hazards adversely affecting the health of children. Children are especially vulnerable to their environment and deserve special concern from their society. They are, we believe, "a gift from the Lord; the fruit of the womb is a reward" (Psalm 127:3). The rabbis of the Talmud centuries ago interpreted the biblical words, "blessed is the one who does righteousness at all times" (Psalm 106:3), as referring to one who gives proper attention to the welfare of their children when they are young (Ketuboth 50a), making the raising and protection of children of paramount importance for the religious community.

Jews and Christians infused with the spirit of the Psalms view nature as a living testimony to a living God, as the Talmud states: "One who goes out in the spring and views the trees in bloom must recite 'blessed is God who left nothing lacking in God's world, and created beautiful trees for humanity to glory in'" (Berakhot 43a) See Jonathan Helfand, "Consider the Work of God: Jewish Sources for Conservation Ethics," in Daniel Polish and Eugene Fisher, editors, *Liturgical*

Foundations of Social Policy in the Catholic and Jewish Traditions (University of Notre Dame Press, 1983) 134-148.

With the praise of God comes moral responsibility, as an ancient rabbinic tale teaches: "When the Holy One, Blessed be He, created Adam, He took him to survey all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him: 'See how beautiful and superior are my works and all that I created for you. Take heed not to corrupt and destroy my world, for if you corrupt it, there is none who can repair it after you'" (Koheleth Rabbah).

Decisions about how we use the environment, and about the environmental health risks to which we expose our children, have a distinct moral dimension for the Church as well. Pope John Paul II has strongly stated that the "state has the responsibility of ensuring that its citizens are not exposed to dangerous pollutants or toxic wastes. The right to a safe environment (*italics in original*) is ever more insistently presented today as a right." John Paul II, "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility," World Day of Peace Message, January 1, 1990, no. 9.

While our country has made significant progress in reducing air pollution and providing clear water over the last several decades, further efforts are needed to ensure safe. This is particularly true in the areas of lead and pesticide poisoning which can lead to damage to the nervous system and to immunity, and for air pollution which can lead to asthma and other breathing problems. While all children are at some risk from exposure, we express a special concern for children from low income families, who share a disproportionate risk and burden from environmental hazards.

We recognize that children are not "little adults". Children have different patterns of exposure to environmental contaminants and also respond differently to them than adults. Additionally, children's normal behavior puts them at increased risk for exposure to toxic substances that may cause debilitating or life threatening health problems. Children, for example, tend to be outdoors more than adults and consequently have greater exposure to pesticides or air pollutants. Infants and toddlers have more exposure to substances in floors, carpeting, and soil.

The ability of children's bodies to cope with harmful substances is also significantly less than that of adults. Young children breathe more rapidly and

inhale more air in proportion to their body weight than do adults. They have higher metabolic rates, drink more fluid, and consume more calories for their body weight. If the air children breathe or the food they consume contains toxic substances, they will receive a larger dose than would adults. Further, because their metabolic systems are not yet mature, they have less ability to detoxify and excrete harmful substances than do adults.

As leaders in the Jewish and Catholic communities, we strongly support efforts to protect the most vulnerable among us, who certainly include the children of our nation. Because of our common concern for and desire to protect our children, we encourage our Jewish and Catholic people at the local and national level to work together to help make our environment safe for children. We urge that this interfaith endeavor will lend special assistance to poorer communities who may not have the resources to address these concerns adequately. We pray together that God Who created this bountiful and beautiful world and Who gives and sustains our lives will enable us and others of good will to provide a safe physical environment for all children.

Joint Social Action Recommendations:

- Create a coalition of key individuals and groups in your community to assist in assessing its "environmental health." Potential members include pediatricians, nurses, health department officials, child advocacy groups, PTAs, and environmental, youth, civil, business, academic and religious groups.
- Educate community and school leaders about children's special vulnerability to toxins, and families about using fewer toxins in their homes, yards and neighborhoods.
- Support "right to know" laws to enable families, schools and communities to learn about their children's exposure to toxic chemicals and products.
- Work with existing community groups who are environmentally concerned. Map your community's known or potential hazards (e.g. dump sites, incinerators, superfund sites, major industry). Check the Toxic Release Inventory (TRI) data available to the public. Work with local industry and government to reduce emissions, clean up sites, etc.
- Religious educators can communicate the ethical and moral dimensions of

this issue from the perspective of Catholic and Jewish social teaching.

· Advocate the development of a national warning system for environmental health risks. While the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has monitored lead levels in human blood over the years, to good effect, it does not monitor for other dangerous pollutants.

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: **“FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR A.”** The CD contains two reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. In addition, there are helpful essays for preaching during the liturgical seasons (Advent, Lent, the Triduum, etc.), ten book reviews and essays on various aspects of preaching. The files are in three formats (Microsoft Word, WordPerfect and Adobe Acrobat Reader) so you should have no trouble opening them on your computer. To purchase go to: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> click on the “Year A–CD” button on the right and follow the instructions.
2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use “First Impressions” in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)
3. Our webpages: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> and <http://www.opsouth.org/> (Where you will find “Preachers’ Exchange,” which includes “First Impressions” and “Homilias Dominicales,” as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)
4. “Homilias Dominicales”-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like “First Impressions”, “Homilias Dominicales” are a preacher’s early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive “Homilias Dominicales” drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org
5. “First Impressions” is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like “First Impressions” sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

DONATIONS

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>
Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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