Ravished Shepherds

Advent 1

28 November 2021

O Lord, teach us to hope.

Advent is the great adventure of waiting for Christ. It has become more or less the waiting for Christmas, but Christmas happened a long time ago. Christ is not in the manger anymore; Mary, the Magi, the oxen, donkeys and sheep are long buried; the shepherds have gone home to their eternal rest and are with the angels that first appeared to them. The birth of Christ is not coming; it came. Christ was born. And we crucified Him. That was how the world responded to the goodness of God. Thanks be to God, hope always wins. After three days, Jesus rose from death and promised to come again to us. That is the real meaning of Advent. It is the expectation of hope that Jesus will keep His promise to come again. In our reading today, Jesus says: “‘There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in a cloud” with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.’” (Luke 21:25-26). The shepherds were watching the sky on the night the angels appeared. It was likely a good way to pass the time as the sheep grazed in the cooler evening air. Perhaps they saw the strange star the Magi were following. Perhaps they were looking at the constellations—which many ancient cultures believed told stories of the divine, of heroes conquering monsters, about a coming future hope. All the while, hope was being born in a town nearby. Not in the glorious stars above, but in the dust and straw of a stable. In our time, we watch the skies—for satellites that enable our telecommunications, for the space station that conducts research, for signs of weather changes that threaten our planet. I don’t think we look to the skies for the same reasons anymore. And I certainly don’t think we look much into straw and dust for signs of hope. Jesus said: “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves”. *Confused.* Nothing is more hopeless than confusion. It is impossible to make good decisions, to complete tasks, to feel good inside when we are confused. It is sad that we look to nature in confusion, in fear, in hopelessness. For Jesus, the shaking of the powers of heaven are not dismal omens. All things are leading to Him. Instead he says, “Stand up and raise your heads because your redemption is drawing near”. Advent is a lesson in hope. Our redemption is drawing near.

For some years now, I have read Advent and Christmas poems on each of the Sundays of Advent, and I have decided to continue that tradition today. The first poem of the season is “A Hymn on the Nativity of My Saviour” by Ben Jonson (1572-1637):

A Hymn on the Nativity of My Savior

I sing the birth was born tonight,

The Author both of life and light;

The angels so did sound it,

And like the ravished shepherds said,

Who saw the light, and were afraid,

Yet searched, and true they found it.

The Son of God, the eternal King,

That did us all salvation bring,

And freed the soul from danger;

He whom the whole world could not take,

The Word, which heaven and earth did make,

Was now laid in a manger.

The Father's wisdom willed it so,

The Son's obedience knew no "No,"

Both wills were in one stature;

And as that wisdom had decreed,

The Word was now made Flesh indeed,

And took on Him our nature.

What comfort by Him do we win?

Who made Himself the Prince of sin,

To make us heirs of glory?

To see this Babe, all innocence,

A Martyr born in our defense,

Can man forget this story?

The irregular sonnet sings the beauty of God’s power. What first comes to mind is the hope we have in God’s ability to do what we cannot imagine: “The Son of God, the eternal King, That did us all salvation bring,

And freed the soul from danger; He whom the whole world could not take, The Word, which heaven and earth did make, Was now laid in a manger.” The One who created the world allowed Himself, so to speak, to be “created”—to enter into creation and be among us. The world cannot encompass God—it cannot “take” God—and yet it did, that Christ might “us all salvation bring”.

As we learned earlier in the year, there is an element of obedience in hope. Without the obedience of the Son, there would be no hope for humanity. Jonson writes: “The Father's wisdom willed it so, The Son's obedience knew no "No," Both wills were in one stature; And as that wisdom had decreed, The Word was now made Flesh indeed, And took on Him our nature.” Another paradox! In order to become spiritual, we must look to the Incarnational. Our flesh profits nothing (John 6:63), but we cannot receive the Spirit unless we receive the Word made flesh (John 1:12). In contemplating and believing and embracing how all goodness and holiness was embodied in Christ, in looking to the cross, we can receive the Spirit and thus overcome our own flesh, our own mortality, our own hopelessness. And Christ accomplished this hope for us through obedience to the Father, by making His own will one with the will of the Father. Jesus was the forerunner of our faith and our spiritual life, for we cannot be with God if we do not conform our wills to God. And we cannot have any hope in this life or in the life to come if we do not truly pray and live the words, “Not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42); “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). God is our hope, and Christ is the way to hope (John 14:6).

Most importantly, the poem speaks of the seeking and remembering that characterizes hope. Sometimes hope is a faint glimmer of light in a long, gray day. Those are the days when memory serves to fan the flames of our hope: “What comfort by Him do we win? Who made Himself the Prince of sin, To make us heirs of glory? To see this Babe, all innocence, A Martyr born in our defense, Can man forget this story?” Our distracted age forgets what has been won for us, and much of our despair lies in ungrateful forgetfulness. God has given us an Advocate who walks by our side, who became sin on the cross that we might be freed of sin and death. When the earth grows old, when the earthshine darkens, when the sunlight weakens, when our bodies become frail, when our dreams decay, when our breath becomes shorter—we are not further from glory than we were before—we are only closer! In the midst of a long, gray night, when all seemed impoverished and forsaken and complicated, with the very real threat of death, God began making us “heirs of glory” through the vulnerable, poor child in the manger. That is something to remember. Yet, we are not called to see life as an endless succession of gray days. The more we grow in the Spirit, the more we take time to ponder the gifts of God and cherish them, the more we wait patiently on the Lord, our hope should grow into something ecstatic, a ravishment such as the shepherds experienced—and they experienced that not just by seeing the angels, but by seeking after what the angels proclaimed: “I sing the birth was born tonight, The Author both of life and light; The angels so did sound it, And like the ravished shepherds said, Who saw the light, and were afraid, Yet searched, and true they found it.” *Yet searched, and true they found it.*

It is interesting that after a great revelation, the shepherds began their search for the Christ. Revelations come in many forms—in ordinary, printed words in dusty Bibles, in gifts from kind strangers, in heartbreaks, in angelic visions or dreams—but they are but a beginning of the real revelation, which is Christ Himself and life in His Spirit. The shepherds “saw the light, and were afraid, Yet searched”! Indeed, we should seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness, but in finding it, we should seek all the more. One should never stop searching and finding Christ. God is inexhaustible, boundless, eternal; Christ is truly the author of “light and life”. Here in is our great hope—which is thus likewise inexhaustible, boundless, eternal.

This Advent, I invite you to place your hope in Jesus for the first time, for the second time, forever. Abandon the hopelessness and confusion. Become a ravished shepherd! Look to the light, to the Saviour born in poverty, who overcame all things—sin, death, sorrow—to give us an eternal heritage, imperishable, unassailable, everlasting—not even the stars or other heavenly bodies can outlast it. Do not forget the true story of existence, the story of the martyr born for our defense, who hopes all things and bears all things that we might be with Him once again in glory. Stand up, raise your heads up. Our redemption is drawing near!