

The Eve of the Nativity of Our Lord: Christmas Eve, Wednesday, 24 December 2017
Saint Ignatius of Antioch Episcopal Church in the City of New York

O God, who makest us glad with the yearly remembrance of the birth of thy only Son Jesus Christ: Grant that as we joyfully receive him for our Redeemer, so we may with sure confidence behold him when he shall come to be our Judge; who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. *Amen.*

Isaiah 9:2-4, 6-7

Psalm 96

Titus 2:4-11

Luke 2:1-20

On Christmas Eve, Christmas is about the triumph of vulnerability. Tonight is all about the unexpected power of vulnerability, the inversion of the received wisdom about what power looks like. Throughout Advent we have been told to watch and wait for the signs of promise, for the coming of the bridegroom, the moment when God will break in to our world. We have been looking for the one of whom John the Baptist says, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” What will this one who baptises with fire look like?

Throughout history power has been associated with physical strength, the wisdom of age, great riches, good looks, charm, and connections. Throughout history it has also seemed that these kinds of expressions of power bring great rewards and success. And through the ages they are so often things to which we aspire.

In Jesus’ day the Roman (and other) gods to whom pious, civic, and personal offerings were made, were all strong, rich, handsome, charming, and well connected.

The Roman gods were also capricious, scheming, treacherous, and deeply flawed. Indeed, they sound a lot like descriptions of the Roman authorities, especially the emperors. Today our role models are not much better and yet still we imagine all too easily that real power looks like these expressions of strength. We may even want our God to be strong in these ways in order to beat the rulers of this world at their own game.

But tonight we know better. Tonight we know that God has broken into our world, crossed the distance between heaven and earth, and taken on our flesh so that we might be reconciled with God and with each other. Isaiah gives us the words and tells us that

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. Thou hast multiplied the nation, thou hast increased its joy; they rejoice before thee as with joy at the harvest, as men rejoice when they divide the spoil.

We know that a monumental shift has taken place and that light pierces the darkness of this long winter night through which we have travelled to be together. We know that joy and rejoicing are the order of this evening and that the cause of it is not the coming of a Jupiter or Mars, but of one whose power comes from vulnerability and the absolute ability to receive and give love.

For this night the form of flesh our Lord, our King, has taken is that of a newborn child. God entered the world as does each of us, in childbirth, an experience

that encapsulates in itself the strength of vulnerability. In those days, childbirth was (as it still is for many in our world), a dangerous and liminal process in which both mother and child face great peril, and through which the child remains completely dependent upon its mother. Dependence and vulnerability become virtues intimately associated with love. Dependence, vulnerability, and love, are the powers of this mighty king.

Isaiah understood this was the way of the God of Israel, that God would act in this surprising way, as he told us:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called "Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore.

The powerful didn't understand Isaiah's prophesy. They did not share Isaiah's confidence that the way of God was to take the one on the margins, the one with no status, the one who could only love and seek nourishment and comfort from his mother, and place him at the centre, place the hopes and expectations of Israel and the Nations upon him. God's way was to take the dependent and vulnerable newborn babe and imbue him with the qualities of wisdom and of peacemaker and assert that he will be the one to sit on the throne of David.

While the powerful did not and could not see this, others did. Mary, the young

Jewish woman who found herself strangely pregnant, accepted the word of the angel and, in her song to her kinswoman Elizabeth, associated this new vocation as a sign that God “hath exhaled the humble and meek.” Joseph her husband believed his bride and, rather than abandoning her, prepared himself to be the human father of his Lord. And our Gospel tonight, the story our children just presented to you, tells us that the shepherds also got the message and heeded the words of the angel that “to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” These shepherds, the ones who tend the flock and seek out the one lost sheep, those who know their sheep and whose sheep know them, went to find this Holy Family. It is their voices that resound with ours as we sing, “Glory be to God on high, and on earth peace, goodwill, towards all.”

Tonight we celebrate the power of vulnerability, the power of God to act decisively in unexpected ways to overturn our expectations about power. We celebrate that it was people with little obvious power who heard and received this message and helped inaugurate this new age, an age that is unfolding all around us even here, even now. Christmas shows us, teaches us, to look for power in love and dependence: to trust in God’s decision to invest power in a baby and to raise him up to a life of service in which he was the one who remained, as he began, supremely able to receive God’s love and supremely able to return it to the world. This is the baby who was later nailed to the cross and still loved us. This is the baby who even after he defeated the death to

which he was subjected showed us that his love, first shared in human form with his mother, is more powerful than death and will triumph over the conventional powers of the world. The story we hear tonight can fill us with confidence that God's ways of vulnerability and love, of interdependence and community can be our ways and inspire us to live out our Christian vocation as love bearers into the world, cooperating with God in the unfolding of the kingdom of which this babe is the monarch.

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