



Devotional Word

from Pastor Paul Hoffman

Gather... Encourage... Equip... Send...

Advent Mid-week Worship

December 12, 2018

This, this is the babe, the son of Mary

Luke 1:26-38

This, this is the babe, the Son of Mary.

My friend Elisabeth Cherland is in her final semester of graduate studies in choral conducting at the University of Washington. This past Saturday night, as a part of completing her degree she directed the Northwest Chamber Chorus in an absolutely stunning concert. The full time conductor, Mark Kloepper, was gracious to step away from the podium for the fall in order for Elisabeth to prepare the choir, and to direct this concert. Gracious woman that she is, she gave voice to that in one of the announcements between songs. This is what she said. "I'm so grateful to Mark for this opportunity. He turned his baby over to me, having no idea if I would be able to take care of it."

This, this is the babe, the Son of Mary. And Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'

He turned his baby over to me, having no idea if I would be able to care for it. God did that. God. God turned his baby over to Mary, to the world, to us. Having no idea if we would know how to take care of it.

And as it turns out, we did not. Echoing the words of the prophet, "He was despised and rejected. A man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." Echoing the words of the hymn, "Nails, spear shall pierce him through, the cross be borne for me, for you." As it turns out, we did not. We did not know how to take care of him. And yet he loved us, this babe, this Son of Mary, loved us all the way from the wood of the manger to the wood of the cross.

One might say, "Well *they* did not know how to care for him." They treated him shamefully. They despised him and rejected him. They did him in. But that was not us. Were we given the chance, we would do differently. Better. Knowing what we know, we would know how to care for this one. This babe, this Son of Mary. Son of God.

But would we?

If only I had been there, Martin Luther writes, If only I had been there, how quick I would have been to help the baby. I would have washed his linen. How happy I would have been to go with the shepherds to see the babe lying in the manger. Yes, we would! We say that because we know how great Christ is. But if we had been there at that time, we would have done no better than the people of Bethlehem. Why don't we do it now? We have Christ in our neighbor.

Bam.

There it is. As it turns out, we do not know how to care for the baby, either. Oh, our crèches are set up with care. Our lights are hung, our trees are decorated, our tables will be full. But out back, out in the alley stables, in the tent encampments by the interstate, in the hidden psych wards behind the fancy inn, we have no idea how to care for the Christ that is in our neighbor.

And make no mistake. The child of God who lies in the alleys, who makes a home in tents shadowed by the our high rises... the child of God who is hidden away in the psych ward or the ICU, the one silenced by fear of retribution or intimidated by years of oppression: this, this, too, is one who bears the image of Christ the Lord, the babe, the Son of Mary.

If only I had been there, how quick I would have been to help the baby. Why don't we do it now? We have Christ in our neighbor.

God has given us Jesus, with no idea of whether we could take care of him. And, as it turns out, we can't. Or don't. Or won't. Sometimes – sometimes – we actually manage to do it. But those times are so few. And far between.

But there is more to this babe, this Son of Mary. Into this frail little body, God has crammed all the love and compassion of God's eternal self. Into this baby, God has poured love unbounded. Love greater than the world has ever seen, or known. And so in the end, even when we cannot care for God, God never tires of caring for us. God knows infinitely more about what we need than we know ourselves. And God pours all that unconditional, gracious care upon saint and sinner alike. No matter how we succeed or fail at caring for the Christ that is in our neighbor in need, Christ never tires of caring for us.

This is who we are, people of God. We are the recipients of, and carriers of, and bearers to the world of the best love and care the world has ever known. God believes in us. And God chosen to partner with us. And through us, God intends for the world to know the endless love of Christ.

Our work will not be done until no one need ask any longer, "What child is this?" Our work will not be done until all the world, is alive, and well, and whole, in the precious love of Jesus, borne to the world by poor sinners like you and me. Our work will not be done until all creation, restored and whole, cries, "This, this is Christ the King, the babe, the Son of Mary."

In the name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.