

Dec. 19 – Hope in the Word

There's a phenomenon in music theory called overtones. When we sing or play a note on a wind instrument, or pluck one string of a stringed instrument, we think we're playing or singing one note. But really, we're singing that note, plus several notes above it in a progression related to the frequency of the sound waves.

There are vocalists who have been so able to enhance this that you can truly hear them singing two or three different notes at the same time. It's called throat singing.

The group Pentatonix, with which some of you may be familiar, is a good example. They have a member of the group that has mastered really bringing out the overtones so you can distinctly hear him sing two notes at the same time. But the harmonics of the entire group are filled with overtones.

In any choral piece or musical ensemble, you are hearing more notes than are actually being sung. In a really talented group in an acoustically live space, the overtones give the music a soaring transcendent quality that sounds like the angels have joined in.

It all comes down to the science of sound. Vibrational frequencies trigger vibrations in the space in a set progression, all of which strike our eardrums. If you were hoping you'd left sine waves behind in high school science, you have. I'll stop there. I don't really get it beyond the very simple explanation.

But here's the connection - in overtones, transcendence and the concreteness of the physical world come together. In a sense, spirit and matter become one.

Overtones are a John 1 thing.

This prologue to John's gospel first takes us on a soaring transcendent journey to where it all began...in the beginning when God was creating heaven and earth...in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.

The overtones of the creation story are the presence of the Cosmic Christ, the logos, or Word, through whom everything came into being.

But then, that transcendent cosmic Christ funnels down to take on human flesh...human flesh that cries and sweats and shivers and bleeds and does all the things our flesh does.

Transcendence and the matter of the created world become one. Spirit and matter become one.

But the reality is, spirit and matter were joined from the very beginning...when a wind, or breath, or spirit, of God breathed over the waters of chaos and an entire universe came into being. And the breath of God continues to breathe life into creation.

John's gospel is the most mystical of the four gospels. People often equate mysticism with a detached spirituality that has no connection with the real world. But in reality, mysticism is the opposite. Mysticism takes very seriously the incarnation and the very presence of God in all the created world.

John's gospel echoes that mystical joining of spirit and flesh. John's gospel is very connected to creation, beginning with this towering poem.

Mysticism is not a retreat from the world. Rather mysticism is finding God at the heart of everything...recognizing that the life of God is in all things created. It's seeing the light that enlightens everyone...in everyone, including yourself.

Hope in the Word is the theme this last week of Advent. When we talk about the Word, as John does here at the beginning of his gospel, we're not talking about the written word in the Bible. We are talking about the cosmic Christ – this divine logos.

Our hope comes from this transcendent divine cosmic Christ who took on human flesh out of profound love for us. That word is a word that can change everything. That divine Word can transform a person...and one by one those transformed people can change the world.

Christ's incarnation wasn't a one and done thing. That Word still takes on flesh...in us.

In early Christianity, the Roman church had Peter as their bedrock. In Matthew's gospel Jesus told Peter, you are the rock on whom I will build my church. In Roman Catholic spirituality, the church became the focal point. It's in the church and its sacraments where God is encountered. The church shaped people's everyday lives.

In the British Isles, a different sort of Christian spirituality was forming. This was the land of the Celts. Celtic Christianity took John as their patron evangelist. They drew on the image of John lying on the chest of Jesus at John's version of the last supper. John it was said listened to the heartbeat of Jesus.

That became a core of their spirituality – listening for the heartbeat of God...in everything. Because when you have a God who becomes incarnate...whether it's the God whose very life was breathed into creation at the very beginning, or a God who became human flesh and became the light that illuminated everything...when you have that kind of God, God's heart beats in everything.

When we hear the heartbeat of God...when we look for the light that illuminates every human being and every aspect of creation, how can we possibly hate? Exploit? Destroy? This just might be where the hope for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century lies. But, first we may have to undo some ideas that have come down to us.

Celtic Christianity emphasized the goodness of creation...it celebrated the goodness of each human being, created in the image of God. Celtic Christianity continued a tradition within the Celtic druid religion that existed before Christ.

It was a religion very steeped in nature. As Celtic spirituality took on a Christian form, it did not see heaven as a distant impossible to reach realm. Instead, heaven and earth, spiritual and material, Word and flesh, were interwoven – they are two realities, here and now. The Celts speak of thin places where heaven seems especially close.

The Celts took sin seriously – while they believed that created goodness in humanity was never completely extinguished, it could become seriously ensnared and blocked by human sin. We cannot save ourselves and Jesus is needed to unbind that inner goodness. But the promise is that the darkness can never completely overcome it.

The development of Roman spirituality took a different path. It became increasingly obsessed with sin. The doctrine of original sin became the core belief about humanity. In that doctrine, sin was sexually transmitted from parents and babies were born utterly sinful from the beginning. Augustine of Hippo in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century spoke of the utter depravity of all humans – that we're so bad we are incapable of choosing to be good.

Augustine went on a mission to the land of the Celts. Not surprisingly, his view of the utter sinfulness of humans from the moment of conception clashed with the gentle Celtic view of the goodness of all creation. Augustine's emphasis on God's presence within the church clashed with the Celtic understanding of the life of God in all creation.

A beautiful thing could have been born from that clash – a spirituality that lifted up the importance of both God's presence in the Church and God's presence in creation – a true both and solution. Instead, a council was held to decide who was right. Augustine won. Celtic Christianity was ruled a heresy. Over the following centuries, its practice and influence waned. But it was never extinguished.

We could really get lost in the theological weeds here. The reality is that the faith we inherit comes from the Reformation. But for the most part, the Reformers were steeped in the theology of the Roman church. They too were very focused on the utter sinfulness of humans

from the very beginning. Martin Luther's bondage to sin is more helpful I think than John Calvin's utter depravity of humans.

But if our focus is so much on sin almost to the exclusion of every other aspect of spirituality, it sets the stage for our own self-image. Is that image dominated by utter sinfulness, or is it dominated by our created goodness in God's image?

Over the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Celtic spirituality regained its footing. And increasingly, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century mystics – people who look for God's presence in the very stuff of life – are wondering if this isn't a way to reclaim the hope that comes from a God who would take on flesh for our sake.

If we see the true light that enlightens everyone, in everyone, can we still hate? If we see the very breath of God blowing into the trees, lakes, rivers, polar ice caps, animals, skies, seas, will it change how we want to relate to that creation? Will it make us a little more willing to say, maybe we should do more to protect it?

Hope in the Word made flesh is an embodied hope. It's a hope planted in us with Christ's light. It's a hope that believes that no matter how often we get things wrong, that light truly never can be overcome by the darkness.