

Christmas Eve 2018

The Divine Embrace

Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church in Camden; December 24, 2018

German theologian Fulbert Steffensky writes: “At the end of the search and the question for God is not an answer but an embrace.”¹ I believe we encounter this embrace powerfully in the story of Christmas. Tonight, we claim that God chooses to embrace the whole material world and our human experience with all its beauty and hardship. However, God does not come as a powerful ruler who smites enemies but by taking on human flesh as a vulnerable baby born to young, poor parents in an occupied land. In light of our experience of a world still ravaged by war and greed with various little Caesars vying for power, and a planet in peril, it is of utmost importance that we don’t lose the subversive paradigm revealed to us this night.

It is a revelation that lets the poor and all who are suffering know they are not alone or forgotten. This includes the children stuck in border custody, the children starving in Yemen amidst a proxy war, and the children going hungry right here in Maine. We all struggle in the face of such suffering. I would venture to say that human history has shown us that it does not suffice for us to think that if we only got the “right” education or elected the politicians who represent our personal preferences, we could somehow, on our own, establish a just and lasting world. Christmas also suggests to us that a much deeper conversion is needed in the human heart.

The biblical tradition claims that we all experience a kind of waywardness by living our lives as though something outside of the love of God had the power to define our worth and belonging. This waywardness takes many forms. Around the world, some think their worth and agency is defined by the size of their portfolio, their arms arsenal or more simply their capacity to supposedly control their own destiny. Some think their worth is defined by their perceived capacity to be morally righteous. Others desperately try to live up to the expectations and projections of their parents or peers without any sense of who they actually are as children of God. Some take refuge in always placing blame outside themselves while yet others get lost in castigating themselves as though their spectacular failings were too much for God.

¹ In the calendar “*Der andere Advent*”, entry for 12/12/2018.

We somehow often experience ourselves living out of a sense of separation from others, from God, and often from ourselves. James Finley, one of my key teachers, writes that although God is always pouring Godself out into the world and into our lives, we have lost touch with this reality. He speaks of a “deprivation of the capacity to experience the love that is never missing.”² In response to this sense of deprivation, God chooses to become identified with us as precious even in our confusion and waywardness by becoming human.

I came across a story that witnesses to this wonder of this divine embrace of us amidst the painful realities of living. The story takes place during WWII (adapted from a collection by Steve Burt [A Christmas Dozen](#)). *An American soldier has been separated from his unit and finds himself alone on Christmas Eve on a farm, much of which has been demolished by recent shelling. He doesn't even know if he is now in Germany or Belgium, but he knows that he is isolated and in danger, cold, angry, and exhausted on Christmas Eve. Needing shelter, he carefully makes his way to the barn. He sneaks through the back door with his rifle poised as he surveys his surroundings. All seems quiet. He notices two haylofts upstairs and decides to make his bed in one of them. Once in the loft, he empties the contents of his pack. He has a can of beans, two bars of chocolate, some powdered milk, and a shawl he bought for his mother in a French village. He looks at the shawl and mutters “Hell of a Christmas,” to himself. He eats the beans, some chocolate and falls asleep, utterly exhausted.*

Suddenly, a sound wakes him. He clutches his rifle and inches his way to the edge of the hayloft. A young mother has made her way into the barn with an infant in her arms seeking refuge for the night. He watches quietly as the mother lifts up the child and cradles it, kissing the baby. She then nurses the child but the child won't fall asleep. After a while, the young mother gets up and dances with the child in her arms to some imaginary tune. She twirls around in her wide skirt and loses herself in the dance while the child falls asleep safely in her arms.

When the soldier looks up for a moment, he notices a pair of eyes in the loft immediately opposite from him. There is enough light to identify that the soldier is wearing a German uniform. This soldier has also been watching the woman but now has his eyes trained on him. Neither of the men move for quite some time. The young mother is completely oblivious to their presence. After a while, the German soldier gets up very slowly, grabs his pack and rifle

² James Finley on disc 6 of *The Divine Ambush*, a CD resource available through www.cac.org.

but holds it away from his body to indicate that he means no harm. He slings his rifle over his shoulder and climbs down the ladder. The woman now freezes in her dance as she becomes aware of his footsteps. She clasps her child in fear and retreats. The German soldier simply nods at her as though tipping his hat and kneels down. He takes out a small music box from his pack and winds it up. A beautiful melody fills the air as he disappears into the night.

Moments later, the American soldier also takes his belongings and his rifle and climbs down. Where the German left his music box – perhaps bought as a gift for a loved one - he now leaves the chocolate and powdered milk. When he looks at the woman, he can tell that her fear has lessened. She draws back the blanket that has been covering her child and lets him glimpse at the beauty of the child's face. The tears begin to flow but no words are spoken. He begins to head for the door but turns around, picks up the music box and winds it up again. Then he takes out the shawl and adds it to the presents. Then he, too, takes his leave and walks into a world so strangely at war with itself, now less and less convincing in its insistence on dividing the world into friends and enemies.

What made the suspension of violence possible? Was it the presence of a vulnerable child born into danger who reminded them of their own lost innocence and deep desire to serve life rather than death? Was it their intuitive sense of how much life is sacred within and around us? I believe that the characters in the story got in touch with their own original blessedness long enough to glimpse it in each other beyond the circumstances that separated them. They re-entered the world changed though the world ostensibly had not.

There is a strong part in me that would have liked to change this story and have the soldiers become friends, have a party with the mother and child, and somehow, magically, put an end to that war. However, I think there is also value in having to grapple with this unfulfilled yearning in us as we watch these men walk out into a cold night with a world still at war. It keeps us in touch with what we truly value and are willing to give in our own day. It asks us to face whether we are prepared to meet each other as children of God, made in God's image, no matter how much we struggle to live into its likeness. Today, as on that ancient night, God does not condone what is broken but speaks tenderly and fiercely to us as well.

Ask yourself tonight, do you call God foolish or wise for coming to us as a child in need of our care? Do you want to accept God's invitation to let God embrace and reclaim us by

asking us to embrace a vulnerable God? Martin Luther once wrote: “So that is what this child wants from us: to be carried and cradled by us. The child wants to be carried by us so that we can finally say, ‘This child is mine.’ Our heart grows wide and strong from this.”³ May we all embrace and claim this child as our own. May we grow wide and strong from this embrace for the sake of all who have gone before us, for all in our time, and for all who are to come. All thanks and praise be to God. Amen.

³ “*Der andere Advent*,” an annual German Advent calendar, the entry for 12/24/2018.