

CHRISTMAS EVE, YEAR C, DECEMBER 24, 2024

On the cable TV show “Inside the Actor’s Studio”, the host James Lipton invites celebrities, famous actors, writers and directors to talk about their careers and how they do what they do. And he always ends each episode the same way, with one particular question: “If you believe that God exists, what do you think God will say to you when you finally see God?” It’s a great question, by the way, to even ask ourselves periodically. It can make for an interesting examination of our conscience. Anyway: on this episode, the person James Lipton was interviewing was Steven Spielberg. Lipton asked him that final question: What do you hope God will say to you when you finally see God? And Spielberg thought for a moment and then smiled. He replied: “I hope God will say to me, Thanks for listening.”

So much of the Christmas story is, truly, about listening. When Gabriel arrives to bring Mary the news that she will bear a child...she listens. When the angel tells Joseph in his dreams what is about to happen...he listens. The shepherds listen when the angel announces the “good news of great joy.” Two thousand years later, we confront this stunning message of “tidings of comfort and joy,” that fills our hearts with the sentiment of the season. We hear it. But are we paying attention? Are we listening? Christmas invites us to listen.

We hear the Christmas story every year. I just read the Luke version but I make a bet that there are a lot of assumptions we make about the stories in both Luke and Matthew about the birth of Jesus that aren’t true.

For instance we assume that Mary rode on a donkey, but the Bible doesn’t say she did. It’s assumed there was an innkeeper, but it doesn’t mention one anywhere. It’s assumed there were three Magi, but it doesn’t give a number of those who showed up. It’s assumed there was a star overhead when Jesus was born, but it doesn’t say that either. It’s assumed that Jesus was born in a stable, but all it says is that He was laid in a manger - and that could’ve been in any number of places.

How well do we listen to what the Gospels really say versus the interpretation that we have adopted. Are we listening to what God is telling us in this Christmas story? What is God telling us?

The reality is we come together this night to worship the one who came to wreck everything! This child’s birth was the plan of a subversive God who snuck into the back door of history on a mission to wreck everything. Coming as one of us vulnerable, poor, and powerless, Jesus came to upend the world as we have constructed it. This is what God is telling us to listen too.

Jesus came to wreck our selfishness and narcissism, so that we might be able to love God and others and to receive that love in return. He came to wreck our fear of death, so that we might be able to live more fully and freely in this life. He came to wreck the political systems which choose who is in and who is out, so that all of God’s children would be included in God’s kingdom. He came to break down our tendency of tribalism pitting one group against another; we just call them political parties, ethnic groups, or faith traditions now. Jesus came to break down our economy of values that puts our material comforts above all else. He came to break down our ideas of family to embrace a wider vision of God’s family, which includes all people, not just the ones like us. Yes, he came to wreck every structure we try to build which puts us first at the

expense of everyone else. As Jesus would later tell his followers, he came not to be served but to serve. And he calls us to follow in his path by listening to what he has taught us through words and example.

There have been countless number of people who have listened intently to God's call who have made a profound difference in our world yet are unknown. Inez Milholland was an early suffragist whose public speeches helped put the suffragist movement on the front pages. She died very young and before the 19th amendment giving women the right to vote was ratified. She didn't listen to the naysayers and instead listened to the voice of God that says we are all equal.

Virginia Randolph, a child of former slaves, who grew up in the Jim Crow South era became one of America's greatest educators on par with Booker T. Washington. She established and administered schools in Virginia, North Carolina and Georgia that educated thousands of black students. She pioneered teaching methods that are used throughout America. She didn't let herself be intimidated by threats but understood that you can't do everything so you just do the next thing which for her was to educate the boys and girls in front of her.

Septima Clark, was a civil rights activist who was truly the Mother of the Civil Rights Movement and played a crucial role in securing voting rights for black people. She established citizenship and literacy classes throughout the south and really was the forerunner to Martin Luther King Jr. She was fond of saying "I can even work with my enemies because I know from experience that they might have a change of heart any minute."

What these three women did was to listen to the voice of God that called them to hope. They didn't wait for hope rather they knew that hope was a choice that they made. It was a choice believing that as they listened to God that things could be better and that what they did mattered.

This is what it means to listen. What is God saying to us. God is sending us the essence of God's self in the gift of Jesus. He does it to give us life, to give us hope. In the birth of Jesus, God understands the importance of really being there. God comes into our messy, roughhewn, world and says – "I love you so much that I am willing to become one of you, to feel what you feel, to think what you think, to laugh as you laugh and to suffer as you suffer."

So, what does this mean for all of us? Well, because God has taken on human flesh that means the work of our human hands are now the means by which light and life come into the world, how grace and truth come into the world. This means that now we, you and I, are to embody the love and compassion of God. Now we are to embody the grace and truth of Christ. Christ was born as one of us so that we might become like him, live like him, love like him. The question for all of us this evening is are we listening and are we allowing Christ to be born in us, to live in us, to live through us?

I'd like to share with you the words of a beautiful Arabic hymn. It is called Laylat al-Milad and it is sung throughout the Holy Land during the Christmas season.

When we offer a glass of water to a thirsty person, we are in Christmas
When we clothe a naked person with a gown of love, we are in Christmas
When we wipe the tears from weeping eyes, we are in Christmas
When we cushion a hopeless heart with love, we are in Christmas
When I kiss a friend without hypocrisy, I am in Christmas

When the spirit of revenge dies in me, I am in Christmas
When hardness is gone from my heart, I am in Christmas
When my soul melts in the Being of God, I am in Christmas

My friends, Christ has come into this very real world of ours and the good news of this miracle is that we are not alone. That is the promise of this holy night. So let us welcome the Christ child. Let us celebrate his birth. But more importantly, let us listen that his life will become our life, his heart our heart, and his work our heart's desire. Amen. Merry Christmas.