

Tracy Daub
12/24/17 (Christmas Eve)--University Presbyterian Church
Mark 15:33-39

THE CRADLE, THE CROSS, AND THE GIFT OF HOPE

In response to the white supremacist march in Charlottesville, the Rev. David Kamphuis joined hundreds of others in Youngstown, Ohio in attending a vigil against hate. It was a standing room only crowd where sermons were preached and letters read from local officials, all condemning the hate that was made visible in Charlottesville. At the end of the vigil they all joined in singing, "We shall overcome." As they were leaving the event, a woman said to David, "This is all very hard for an old woman. I sang that song 50 years ago and here we all are still singing this damn song."

It can be discouraging to say the least to face the unrelenting darkness that is present in our world. There are times when after watching the news or reading the paper and learning about yet another account of cruelty or hatred or greed that I will wonder in amazement why hasn't God thrown in the towel on this whole experiment with humanity.

Add to that our own personal struggles and pain, the grief we bear, the way we may not be able to get a handle on our own destructive habits and behaviors, and it is understandable why discouragement and even despair can overtake us. Despair is understandable if we place our hope on the expectation of progress--on the idea that we humans should be getting better, improving with the passage of time.

The thing is, Scripture never promises us that idea of progress. Nowhere in Scripture is there the promise that the world will keep getting progressively better, or that violence and cruelty against others will gradually diminish until it is extinguished altogether, or that racism will decline over time until it is finally eliminated. The hope Scripture gives us does not rest

upon the idea of the continual improvement of humanity. Rather, the hope that Scripture gives us rests on the activity of God in our world, and specifically on this issue that we gather here tonight to celebrate: the incarnation.

The word *incarnation* is a term used to describe how God took on human flesh and entered our lives in the person of Jesus. That is the essence of the Christmas story--God becoming human. On Christmas we gather around Jesus' cradle and gaze with wonder at how God came to us as, of all things, a baby! It is revealing that instead of coming into our lives in a superhero's suit, ready to take on the evil of this world with power and might, God brings hope to us by entering this world as all of us do: as a vulnerable, helpless baby. Of course, there is something about all babies that inspires hope and love--love, in part for their tender vulnerability, and hope for the potential that lies within that newborn life. Every parent gazes on their baby with hope and love. God reflects that love for our tender vulnerability and a commitment to the potential God seeks to grow within us by coming to us as one of us. And so the incarnation is about God becoming one of us, joining us in this human existence as *Emmanuel*, meaning "God with us," so that something new might be born within us. That is what we sing about the Christ child: "Be born in us today."

The Gospel of Mark, however, offers us a different perspective on the incarnation. Unlike the other three gospels, Mark's gospel has no story about Jesus' origins. Instead of beginning with a birth story, Mark begins his gospel with a fully grown Jesus carrying out his ministry. If all we had was Mark's gospel, we would probably not be sitting here tonight, since we would not have a conventional Christmas story. So, I am glad we have the other three gospel accounts of Jesus' origins. And yet, if our celebration of the incarnation were to end at the Christmas story, it would be an incomplete account. We humans are not only born but we also

live and we also die. If the incarnation is about God's love for us and our human condition, then the incarnation must also reveal God walking with us through the joys, sorrows, failures, and struggles of life and ultimately our deaths. And that is why the incarnation story in Mark is found not in the sweet baby Jesus in the cradle but in the Jesus dying on the cross. The cross is Mark's incarnation story.

Now, how can there be any hope in *that*--in suffering and in death? Some people are turned off by Christianity's focus on the cross, arguing that we Christians glory in violence and suffering. Christians themselves have often distorted the meaning of the cross, turning it into the means by which a wrathful god's anger is satisfied. For others the cross is symbolic of all that is wretched about the human condition--our propensity to violence and hatred and brutality--and thus, it could never offer any measure of hope.

Of course, the cross does indeed reveal humanity's wretchedness. Every day our world is full of endless accounts of human cruelty and suffering: of desperate refugees dying on the seas, of women being exploited and children being abused, of starvation and torture and warfare. But instead of abandoning us to this grim reality, God *enters* this reality. The incarnation is about God joining us in our human condition. The incarnation revealed at the cross is the story of God's fierce love of humanity and steadfast solidarity with us in our darkness in order that God might transform that darkness.

At the age of 14, Christian Picciolini was radicalized by a group of neo-Nazis. By the age of 16 he had risen in the white supremacist movement to become the leader of a skinhead group in Chicago. For years he preached a message of hate, carried out acts of violence, and convinced other people to commit acts of violence. One day, he and a group of his neo-Nazi followers chased an African-American man out of a bar and proceeded to brutally beat this man,

for no other reason than for his skin color. As the man was lying curled up on the ground, bloodied and swollen as the group of them continued kicking him, Christian recalls the man opened his eyes and made eye contact with him. And in that moment, Christian suddenly saw the man's humanity and for the first time had empathy for one of his victims. This awakening resulted in his gradual distancing and ultimately severing all ties with the white supremacist movement. Seeking to heal rather than harm, Christian now counsels other individuals who are trying to leave the movement and serves as a consultant for law enforcement.

I think about that moment when his victim looked Christian in the eye--that moment of awakening when Christian saw who he had become and when he was inspired to be something else. Perhaps we might think about Jesus on the cross as the occasion when Jesus looks *us* right in the eye, when Jesus connects with our darkness, our pain, our confusion, our feelings of being lost, our emptiness, when Jesus looks us in the eye not to shame us or condemn us but to transform *us*. Jesus looks us in the eye as we are caught up in our deep darkness and brokenness and says to us, "That's not all you have to be." There is more that God can do with each one of us--so much more potential in us than our brutality, and selfishness, and pettiness, more than our frantic efforts to be successful and make money, more than lives centered on acquiring stuff to fill our homes, more to us than the grudges we bear against one another, and the bombs we drop, and the walls we build. The cross is a moment of brutality, for sure, but it is also a moment of awakening to the God who looks us in the eye with transforming love.

God becomes human and enters our darkness to show us that that is not all we have to be. And thus, the incarnation is the gift of hope given this Christmas to you and to me. It is a hope not grounded in ourselves or our own goodness or our own potential, but rather in God's goodness and God's potential for us. Through God's transforming love, we can be people who

offer kindness, and share our bread, and help refugees, and compose symphonies, and cure diseases, and offer forgiveness, and tear down walls between people. This is the gift of hope given to us in our darkness, given to our world in its darkness. As we gather at the cradle, we find hope in the new life God can birth in us. As we gaze at the cross, we see the way God enters the wretchedness of human existence with a love that transforms and which raises us to new life. And we have hope.

So, here we all are still singing the same darn songs! It's true. These carols we sing each year, we've sung them before. We sang them last year, and the year before that. We've sung them for decades and for centuries. In a world of despair, we just keep gathering gather to sing our songs celebrating God's gift of hope born to us this day. We just keep singing the same songs of hope. And we have no intentions of stopping.