

Christ in You, the Hope

Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

November 29, 2020

Colossians 1:24-29

Today is the first Sunday in Advent. The theme of the first Sunday is hope. Then on the following Sundays, peace, joy, and love.

Through these weekly themes, underlying and uniting them, runs another theme, the foundational theme of Christianity, the incarnation.

To the second and third generations of Christians fell the task of formulating what they were coming to believe about Jesus. You can see them searching, looking for a way to explain Jesus' relationship with God. "*He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being,*" said the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews. (1:3) "*He is the image of the invisible God,*" wrote the author of Colossians. (Colossians 1:13) "*In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.*" (Colossians 1:19)

I like Paul's simple way of putting it, precisely because he didn't try to explain it: "*God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.*" (II Corinthians 5:19) Jim Wallis, founder of the Sojourners community in Washington, D.C., puts it as simply and as clearly in his new book Reclaiming Jesus: "Jesus is our embodiment of God's love, justice, grace and mercy. . . ." (17)

There is another theme, a corollary to the incarnation of God in Christ, the incarnation of Jesus in the church, in you and me.

I know that sounds a tad grandiose, to say that Jesus is incarnate in us and that we are "the hope of glory," but it is right there in the passage we just read from the Epistle to the Colossians: "*To (the saints) God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. It is he whom we proclaim . . .*"

The hope of glory, wrote the author, is "*Christ in you.*"

Frankly, that's a bit much to lay on ordinary Christians like you and me, don't you think? Anyone here want to be the one on whom hope rests? Is that what you signed up for when you were baptized? We got into this to "get saved," didn't we, not to be someone's hope.

Yet the incarnation of Jesus in those who follow him is a theme that runs through the New Testament, especially in the writings of Paul. "*Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus . . .*" he wrote to the Christians in Philippi. (Philippians 2:5) He told the Roman Christians that we have been "*predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.*" (Romans 8:29) To the Corinthians he wrote, "*All of us . . . seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.*" (II Corinthians 3:18)

Just as the love, justice, grace and mercy of God was lived out in the body, the life, the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the spirit of Jesus is now lived out in the church, which Paul liked to call the body of Christ. Just as the Word of God "became flesh and dwelt among us" in the life and ministry of Jesus, the Word has become flesh in the church and dwells among the peoples of the world, the vast family of God. Which makes Jesus' followers, – you and me – "the hope of glory." Whether we like it or not.

"God was in Christ." "Christ in you." The incarnation of God in Christ. The incarnation of Christ in the church. That was the plan.

I hope not much is riding on that plan. Because the church – Christianity -- had been in tough sledding lately.

In 2019 the Pew Research Center published the findings of a survey of religion in America. The findings were startling to many casual observers, but they were not surprising to students of religion in America and to anyone who has eyes to see.

The survey found that there were 12% fewer Americans claiming to be Christians in 2019 than there were ten years before – 9 million fewer Protestants and 2 million fewer Catholics -- and that twenty-five per cent of Americans claim no religious affiliation at all.

Church attendance is down, giving is down, membership is shrinking, churches are closing. All mainline denominations are suffering, but none like the Presbyterian Church USA . Between 2008 and 2018 it lost 37% of its members. One observer noted that at this rate the Presbyterian Church USA will not exist in 20 years.

These developments have sparked a lot of furrowed-brow conversations about the “decline of Christianity” in America.

I am not concerned about the future of Christianity, if by “Christianity” you mean the institutional forms of the church. My observation is that institutions die hard, especially big ones. After a while, institutions exist to exist. They kick into a survival mode, and it’s hard to kill them.

I recall a meeting when I was on the staff of First Baptist Church of Waco, right out of seminary. The Sunday evening service – remember Sunday evening services? -- was poorly attended, and it was a drag on everyone’s energy and enthusiasm. Finally, someone on the staff – I forget who -- spoke the words no one had dared to say out loud, “Don’t you think it’s time to kill the Sunday evening service?” To which associate pastor Owen Kersh, who had been around the block a few times, responded dryly, “Why don’t we just declare it dead.”

My concern is of a different order. I have mentioned before Stephen Jones’ book White Too Long and the research done by his organization – Public Religion Research Institute -- that showed that in surveys white Christians rated 20-40% higher on a racism index than whites who are unaffiliated with any religious group. Granted, that’s a single issue, a snapshot, but really? That’s the hope of glory?

If the church doesn’t speak up and act out against injustice done to the children of God, if it allows itself to be co-opted by culture to the point that the only recognizable difference between followers of Jesus and everyone else is what you do on Sunday morning, what good is it? Seriously.

If the church does not embody the spirit, heart, wisdom, courage, audacity, passion, compassion, and values of Jesus, why does it exist? To offer invocations at football games? If the church is not the embodiment of Jesus, how can we justify its existence?

If Jesus is not incarnate in these fragile bodies and fallible souls, in these sometimes creaky structures, it doesn’t matter whether the church lives or dies. If Jesus is not incarnate in the church, the church is just taking up taxable space. As well as donations that could be used in better ways in the service of humanity.

The issue, said Jim Wallis, the bottom-line issue is, “We have become disconnected with Jesus.” I think that is true.

During 2017 and 2018, Bishop Michael Curry, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, preached a series of revivals. Let us pause a moment and let that sink it: the

Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church preached a series of revivals. If that sounds Baptist, it is no coincidence. Bishop Curry's father, grandfather and great-grandfather were Baptist preachers. The revivals Bishop Curry preached were intended "to stir and renew hearts for Jesus . . . and to welcome people who aren't part of a church to join the Jesus Movement."

Bishop Curry wrote the Foreword to Jim Wallis' book Reclaiming Jesus.

Now is the time to reclaim that bold and countercultural Jesus who said things like, "Blessed are the peacemakers," "love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you," "you cannot serve God and wealth," and "love your neighbor as yourself." . . . who was unafraid to sit with those who others considered unacceptable, unwilling to be co-opted by the powers that be, undeterred in reaching out to the friendless and the needy, the down cast, the put down, and the disinherited. . . . who Dietrich Bonhoeffer called 'the man for others' who showed what love looks like, giving up his own life not for anything he could get, but for the good, the well-being, the welfare, the salvation and redemption of others." (Reclaiming Jesus, x)

The world needs the church, but only the church in which Jesus is incarnate.

I know all this sounds very religious; I can assure you that no one is more surprised about that than I am. But since my early years Sunday School teachers, like "Uncle Charlie" Whitthorne, and pastors, like "Brother" Jerry Schmucker, the self-educated former blacksmith, have impressed on me the importance of being formed, shaped, molded in the image of Jesus.

That is what this season is all about.

If you need a prompt, here is one. At some point in this Advent and Christmas season, you will be invited to participate in a carol sing. Most of us know a couple of dozen carols, but usually only the first verse. This year, when you get to "O Little Town of Bethlehem," sing the fourth verse instead of or in addition to the first:

*O holy Child of Bethlehem, Descend to us, we pray
Cast out our sin and enter in, Be born in us today*

For Jesus to be born in us, that is the hope.

Benediction

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13) Amen.