

A New Lens

A Message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

December 11, 2022

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

The art you see on screen, entitled wilderness Blossom by the Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman, is inspired by the prophecy of Isaiah that you heard read this morning by Jacqueline. As with all the featured pieces of art this Advent in worship, it seems very evocative to me. In spite of the barrenness of Isaiah's land of Judah, a community plundered by colonization, yet there remains hope – hopefully you can see the purple crocuses, the eyes opened, the hand strengthened.

This is the lens as like a kaleidoscope; remember those things you looked into, and you would see swirls of colour? The artist says this:

A kaleidoscope doesn't expose your eye to anything that isn't there. It takes what is in view, and with light and mirrors, creates a new, dynamic, luminous image. The overlapping, novel perspectives, light, and movement transform mundane and even unappealing subjects into vibrantly dancing masterpieces.¹

It makes me think of the song by the Beatles, "Strawberry Fields." At the heart of the song that John Lennon wrote, is a memory from his childhood of visiting the garden behind the nearby Salvation Army home for children called Strawberry Field. The song itself redefined rock songs, musically, it sounds like something of a kaleidoscope. It is not escaping the reality likely experienced by those children who needed the care of the Salvation Army in Liverpool, England, but finding wonder in the midst of the struggle.

Luke's version of the birth of Jesus is very different from Matthew take on it. Luke follows Mary's experience very closely, but Matthew focuses more on Joseph, at least a few verses. The birth of Jesus comes almost as an aside in the Gospel of Matthew. Joseph, engaged to Mary, has found out that she is pregnant, and apparently about to do the gentlemanly thing and quietly end the engagement, to walk away. But, hark, that angel always prefacing the startling message by saying "be not afraid" tells him that he is to be a father to a baby who will grow up to save God's children from their sins. One reference, then, to the birth – *Joseph did not have marital relations with Mary until Jesus was born.*

An interesting question is raised from a feminist lens:

Why did it take divine intervention for Joseph to choose the better way? It took a vision and a celestial being for Joseph not to abandon his partner.²

My white, male, privileged filter has never seriously considered this question before. An interesting lens from our modern perspective, knowing well how many women, are left to carry the burden of pregnancy, or face hard choices, if they have safe and accessible resources available to them. It valuable to change the lens through which we see things ancient and modern, especially letting go of biases that privilege have taught you and me.

¹ Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman, SanctifiedArt.com 2022.

² Commentary on Matthew 1: 18-25 Dr. Christine J. Hong. Sanctified Art

This is a significant, life-altering, event for Joseph (and Mary as well), potentially prompting that lizard brain flight response. I'm thinking about Joseph, perhaps his fragile ego bruised, the one in this relationship who has the privilege of fleeing.

Rev. Darrell Hamilton, reflecting on becoming a father for the first time, ponders the experience of Joseph, after the angel visits him and tells him that he will be a father – not a biological one, but an adopted one. "Not by DNA" Hamilton muses, "but mutual affection and interdependence is a father eternally bound to his child(ren), and vice versa. Even though Mary was chosen to be the God-bearer, Joseph was commanded to be the God-rearer."³

Scholar Karoline Lewis brings yet another helpful lens to this third Sunday of this journey of preparation for Christmas birth, in Bethlehem and in us. She focuses in sharply on Matthew's angel using Hebrew prophetic words to claim that Jesus will be called "Emmanuel", God with us. Of this, Lewis says:

The promise of Jesus' birth and Jesus' name is, "God is with us," not "God is with you." That first-person plural pronoun establishes how God in the flesh chooses to be in the world. Not for ... individual gain... Not for our personal salvation. But to remind us of who we are meant to be and supposed to be—people in community, with God.⁴

So, friends, get your theological kaleidoscopes out, see the journey of Advent this year through different eyes and experiences. It is not easy for me, with my comfortable lens of privilege, perhaps you can more-or-less relate. I just lamented the end of an era in the late-night universe, Trevor Noah, host of the Daily Show signed off on Friday night. He took more than ten minutes to offer what I thought was a secular sermon filled with challenge and a powerful note of gratitude. Media writers point out that, once again, there are no persons of colour hosting late night television – a perspective that Noah brought, an important one especially in the past 7 years where white supremacy has been on the rise, while democracy and human rights and the rule of law seem to be at risk. His last words stuck with me, his foundational lens given him by those who nurtured him from childhood:

I always tell people if you truly want to learn about America, talk to Black women. Because unlike everybody else... Black people understand how hard it is when things go bad."⁵

Dare to find a new lens through which to experience Christmas, friends. As you find gifts for loved ones, as you watch the news that tempts you to change the channel to an escapist Hallmark Christmas movie. Dare to let cold hearts be broken open, and minds expanded to realize that we are part of a wonderful, wounded world. God cares about all Creation, including you and me. Amen.

³ Rev. Darrell Hamilton. December 14, 2021. baptistnews.com

⁴ Karoline Lewis, "Dear Working Preacher"

⁵ For a video clip and snippets from his final, impromptu, signing off message:

<https://www.harpersbazaar.com/celebrity/latest/a42199203/trevor-noah-speech-final-daily-show-sign-off/>