

Generous: Hope | December 2, 2018

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"...there was the baby, lying in the manger. After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished..." (Luke 2.16-17)

- A friend of mine was marvelling this week at how many people are interested in Christmas and the surrounding season, even if they don't have a Christian background. We agreed that something about the kindness, the mystery, the hope of the season draws people in.
- It's like we're all lured by a single candle shining in the deep, quiet woods, welcoming one another to step out of the darkness and into light, to draw near and warm our hands.
- The woods are so dark, some are suspicious, not quite sure what to make of the warmth, the gathering. What does this single, brightly burning light mean?

Astonished

- Reading St. Luke's Gospel we quickly discover his liberal use of the word "astonished", or what is sometimes translated "amazed". It first appears when the shepherds share their experience of visiting Mary, Joseph and the infant Jesus. According to Luke the result is that "all who heard the shepherd's story were astonished" (Luke 2.17).
- That's the first public reaction to God's action in the world through the life of Jesus - astonishment at the birth of a child and the so called "good news that will

bring great joy to all people" (Luke 2.10). Amazement is the response to God's generous love at work within a dark, disconnected and mistrusting world.

- Astonishment isn't an uncommon reaction to generosity today. When we experience generosity, even in the most ordinary of moments, we're often taken aback, not quite sure of what to do with what's in front of us. Someone helps us when they don't have to; someone forgives us, letting us in from the cold when we've otherwise been shut out; someone gives us something we couldn't give ourselves.
- Very often these sorts of moments are unexpected, and so generosity is met with a kind of shock because we've become accustomed to a world in which charity isn't found in abundance - we get used to just scraping by.
- For all our technological progression, all our growth as a species, we still live in a world where too many don't have enough. Enough love, enough provision. A world with too many refugee camps, too many threats of war and turmoil, too many lonely people and forgotten names.
- Right now we're being told that 13 million people in Yemen are facing starvation, what the UN predicts as possibly the world's worst famine in 100 years. As the civil war rages on, each side backed by other nations with their own agendas, it's the people who are caught in the middle. The world doesn't feel like a generous place sometimes.
- So, when we bump into a generous person or action we could be forgiven for tilting our heads, raising an eyebrow and asking: *is it really true?* Can we really trust that generosity is as present and as at work in the world as greed or selfishness?
- We stand there, dumbfounded, trying to wrap our minds around the possibilities. As much as we welcome the generosity of others, we're not always ready to depend on it. *Is that blip on the radar really to be trusted?*

Generous

- At the same time, if we were pressed to think of one word to sum up the entire Christian story, one word that best defines the God of the Bible as seen through the central figure of Jesus, it would be difficult to think of a better word than *generous*. That's what bursts through the narrative from the very beginning to end.
- *But is it really true?* – we might ask. Can we really trust that God is generous? Do we dare imagine a future - a future Jesus seemed to envision - in which we might learn to be generous with one another?
- Those kinds of questions are also asked by the characters we meet in the Bible, because they too lived in a world where generosity felt more than a little off the radar. But the story we read at Advent and Christmas, of Jesus' birth and infancy, is about what's creeping onto the radar. That strange sense that something, slowly but surely, is shifting. That a light is shining in the deep darkness.
- The news that something's shifting is what the Bethlehem shepherds shared; news that said that God's loving character could be trusted. The generous action of God was finally dawning on the world "to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death" (Luke 1.79).
- That's the news at Jesus' birth: darkness won't be a given forever, the light is here; restlessness is fading, peace is a possibility; greed and selfishness isn't a foregone conclusion, generosity is on the horizon.
- As Gandalf says to Frodo, deep in the black mines of Moriah in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, "there are other forces at work in this world besides the will of evil."
- That's a hopeful thought to try and hold on to, but for all who witness daily the effects of greed, selfishness and hatred, it's almost unbelievable. So, astonishment is a normal reaction to the hope presented us at Advent and Christmas.

The Truth

- Astonishment is where we begin when we first encounter the message of this season. Facing up to the truth about God *rightly* sends us reeling.
- If we're not amazed by the gospel of Jesus, have we let it really wash over us, faced the music as it's written, dared to imagine the possibilities?
- The music as it's written hums that generosity is at the very heart of things. That the God's generous love is *the truth*. That smack in the middle of the universe, holding everything together, is the reality of a being who is endlessly selfless, and at work amongst us as we speak.
- And, no matter how hard it might be to believe, the abundance that flows from this source is offered us freely. It's quite fitting that "Amazing Grace" has become the most famous of Christian hymns. How else do you react to that kind of news?

Choice

- Perhaps that's the astonishing thing about the baby laying in a feeding trough. Reading the Gospels sometimes feels as if we're being told: *Right, here you are. Take it or leave it. Pick it up, or let it shiver in the cold - but the truth has arrived and the truth is generous. Now, what are you going to do with it?*
- That's jarring. It's only natural to step back in astonishment. The emphatic generosity of Jesus' life causes us to respond: *Hang on. I may need to take another look at this. I thought I had the world worked out, but this news changes things, this light is putting things in a different perspective.*

Wonder

- Some translations of Luke's Gospel use the word "wonder" in place of "amazed" or "astonished". Taken seriously, that's exactly what the generous news about Jesus produces: *wonder*.
- Because of Jesus we have reason to wonder, to be amazed, at the possibilities of a future filled with plenty rather than scarcity, light rather than darkness.
- I'd suggest our interest in glowing trees bowing over heaps of presents, or lit houses filled with family and friends in the gloomy mid-winter, might have something to do with that wonder, that longing for light and plenty.
- So this time of year, Advent and Christmas, in large part, is just about stepping back and trying to take in what we hardly have room to compute, what we long for, but hardly dare hope for.
- The season is about being overwhelmed by a truth that seems too good to be true - could God really be generous, and could we each step further into the light and warmth of his love, and learn to be generous with one another?
- All those lights and warm embraces, all those gifts and carols, draw us to the remembrance of that reality and that hope.

Hope

- That astonishing, wondrous news we hear during this time of year is intrinsically *hopeful*, and hope is what this first week of Advent draws us into.
- Hope that things can change because God's arriving and at work. Hope that a simple need will be met. Hope that 13 million people starving in Yemen isn't the end of our story. Hope that we can leave the selfishness and scarcity behind by opening up to God's humble and plentiful love.
- Hope that God can be found in even the deepest, darkest spot.

- So during this season, as we kneel by the manger, as we draw closer to that candle burning brightly in the deep, dark woods, we're invited to dare to hope in God's generosity - even if it feels like an audacious posture.

Discussion Questions:

- Can you think of a time that your experienced generosity that left you a little amazed?
- Do you think the world is a selfish or a generous place?
- What do you think you put your hope in? Or, what do you hope for? Why?
- Why is hope is so central to the Christmas story and message of Jesus?