

Church of the Crossroads  
Third Sunday of Advent  
December 16, 2007  
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LIFE BREAKING FORTH

Isaiah Chapter 35  
Psalm 146  
Matthew 11:2–11

John the Baptist is in prison, and he wonders whether or not Jesus is the promised Messiah. He wonders if Jesus is the one who is to come, or should he and his disciples wait for another. After all, Jesus has not turned out to be the kind of Messiah John first expected. Jesus has not held a winnowing fork in his hand. He has not cleared his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the granary, and then burning the chaff with unquenchable fire. Jesus has turned out to be a gentler Messiah than that, a Messiah preaching an ethic of love for one's enemies, a Messiah gathering sinners and outcasts around a common table, a Messiah filled with compassion rather than retribution.

And so John, in prison, is curious. He sends his disciples to Jesus to ask him the burning question. Is he the promised One? Jesus answers the disciples' query. *“Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”* (Mt 11:4–6)

It sounds as if we have an Easter text in the middle of Advent! Yet, when we reflect on Advent and Christmas in their deepest dimensions, we realize that in truth the incarnation is all about new life. With the birth of the child—Emmanuel—God-with-us—the kingdom of life breaks in upon the kingdom of death. The blind see; the deaf hear; the lame walk; lepers are cleansed; the dead are raised; and the poor have good news preached to them.

Now, as Larry Wayman pointed out in our Lectionary study last Monday, this does not mean that the blind are no longer blind, the deaf are no longer deaf, the lame are no longer lame, or the poor no longer poor. We are not speaking here of cure; we are speaking of healing, and there is a

difference. Have you not known a blind person who can see, or a lame person who refuses to be limited, or poor people who refuse to accept their condition as something that cannot be changed? This response of Jesus should not be taken literally. No, what is being spoken of here has to do with courage and resistance and hope and persistence and joy in the midst of sickness and oppression and limitation. What Jesus speaks of is new life.

It is the same with those exiles of ancient times who hear good news preached to them by the prophet Isaiah. The prophet announces a great reversal in the order of things. The wilderness and the dry land are glad. The desert rejoices and blossoms and rejoices with joy and singing. Weak hands are strengthened; feeble knees are made firm; the fearful become strong; the blind see; the deaf hear; the lame leap like a deer; those with no voice sing for joy. The mirage becomes an oasis rather than the other way around. The exiles will return in safety to Zion along a highway in the desert prepared by God. Hope and courage and joy are the order of the day. New life is given. That does not mean that the exiles will be free of suffering. They will return to a devastated Jerusalem and a temple in ruins. Life will be difficult. But new life will be theirs in the midst of it all.

With the assistance of Curtis White, I will now speak of a contemporary expression of the same story. You might be a little surprised by the example. However, in his book *The Spirit of Disobedience*, which I can hardly put down, Curtis White offers an amazing interpretation of the film *Brokeback Mountain*.<sup>1</sup> The conventional way of interpreting this film has been to see it as a tragedy, a film about “forbidden passion” and “the anguish of unfulfilled love” that “hits you like a shot in the heart.” (White’s quotes) Interpretations using this kind of language focus on the love between Jack and Innis, the two gay cowboys, as painful and filled with a kind of desperation. Those who view the movie are expected to leave the theatre outraged by the way society condemns homosexual love and how tragic it all is. This is reinforced in the end of the movie when we see Ennis impoverished, broken-hearted, without prospects, and living in a seedy trailer.

White views the film differently. He sees the film as a testimony to newness of life in the midst of the kingdom of death. It is a film about joy, he says:

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<sup>1</sup> Curtis White, *The Spirit of Disobedience*. Sausalito, CA: PoliPoint Press, 2007. 39–43.

Curiously, for me the dominant emotion of film was not sadness. It was joy. Pleasure. We see this joy in two consistent ways throughout the film. First, in the gorgeous and deeply pleasurable cinematography of brilliantly angled shots of sheep flowing over mountains, water flowing over rocks, and horses climbing among trees. (p. 40)

Hearing this description, we immediately think of Isaiah's description of the blossoming desert with its springs of water. White says that the cinematography of *Brokeback Mountain* is not an add-on. Rather, it reveals the central message of the film, namely, that life and joy can be found in the midst of death and sadness. That is exactly the message contained in the response of Jesus to John's disciples.

White says that his interpretation of *Brokeback Mountain* is also reinforced by the joy of the acting, especially Heath Ledger's performance as Ennis. He writes:

. . . what I find most wonderful about Ledger's performance is its excess. It is in excess of dramatic requirements. His performance itself becomes the focus of interest in the film, and it is deeply pleasurable. I would also suggest that the joy/pleasure of Ledger's performance is always arguing against the film's social themes and therefore against its nihilism. It's as if [the filmmaker] is saying, "How can this story be sad if there's so much beauty in this face, this voice, this performance?" (p. 41)

In the end, White maintains, we are not left with the image of a tragic, impoverished Ennis, broken-hearted, living in a seedy trailer. What we see is Ennis looking out of a window of the seedy trailer at his daughter, who has come to visit and ask him to be present for her wedding, and whom he loves with all his heart.

In the end, we say to ourselves: "This is a life that is worth so much that it is worth living again." What more could any one of us say. "My life, with all of its ups and downs, has been so filled with joy and fulfillment that I would be glad to live it again." This is life in the midst of death. This is joy in the midst of sadness. This is the good news of Advent, the good news

of the incarnation, that because God comes to be with us in Jesus we can live life joyously, courageously, boldly.

There is a curious ending to the response of Jesus to John's disciples. Jesus says, "*Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.*"

We ask: "How could anyone be offended by this Jesus in whose path new life breaks forth among the deaf and lame and poor, and joy abounds?" How could a prophetic speech announcing a return to Zion for those in exile be an offense? How could a film like *Brokeback Mountain* represent a threat? How could life be a threat?

Well, my brothers and sisters, it just takes a little imagination to see how life can be a threat. The empire would prefer that exiles stay in exile. Those who reap profits from the ways of economic capitalism do not appreciate the poor having good news preached to them. A homophobic society does not want to see two men finding joy in their love for one another. Herod will do his best to snuff out the life of the child Jesus. New life is a threat to the kingdom of death.

There is, then, a cutting edge to the good news of Advent. The incarnation can be a threat to those who want to keep things the way they are. New life, you see, can *change the world*, especially when it is embodied in a community of human beings and not just in the lives of individuals.

First, though, we must recognize and acknowledge the new life God gives in our own lives. For even now, God in Jesus, breaks in upon us and grants us joy for sorrow, healing for illness, hope for despair. In Jesus, Emmanuel—God-with-us—we are granted the grace and courage to sing and rejoice and take a stand for life in the midst of death. Surely, nothing can threaten our resolve so to do. Thanks be to God.