

**The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – December 24, 2019 – In Relation
Isaiah 9:2,6-7 and Luke 2:1-20**

From kindergarten through the third grade, I was a student at a private day school. There were only eight children in my class. I remember getting along really well with most of my peers. There are a few of my classmates that I cannot remember this many years later. And there was one child, in particular, that I simply did not like. I don't even remember why.

What I do recall is that, one year, with my birthday fast approaching, it was time to extend invitations to the party. I had a hunch that my mother would not approve of my plan. Even so, I informed her of my intention to invite every child in the class except for that one boy. She listened carefully and patiently to what I had to say. Then, frowning with disappointment, she explained that I needed to extend the invitation to everyone. "Even if you are reluctant," she told me, "it is the right thing to do." In the course of that brief conversation, she taught me a number of valuable lessons about my relationship with her, with others, and with God.

The French philosopher Gabriel Marcel contends that "the human person is discoverable only in relation to other persons. Experienced first in the womb and in

a child's experience of her own parents," we become aware of the self. ¹ "By continuing such relations responsibly," we learn about the nature of hope. A child recognizes herself in relation to her parents, while her parents find their way, as parents, in relation to her. ²

As a mother prepares to give birth, she does not know which specific hardships await, or even when or where those difficult conversations may take place. From the beginning, she simply falls in love, not with some abstract ideal of a baby, but rather, with a particular child with whom she is and will grow in relationship.

In Luke's Gospel, Mary is chosen, for reasons both known and hidden, to bear the Son of God. And soon, she falls in love with a particular baby named Jesus. It is Mary who will provide for his nourishment, dry his tears, and calm his anxieties. It is she who will teach him to make good choices. And it is she who will introduce him to the world, sometimes kind and joyful and sometimes harsh beyond measure.

Recently, a church member told me about a conversation that had moved her. A small child was approaching the schoolyard with her mother one blustery morning. The temperature had dipped below freezing, snow lay on the ground, and,

¹ Joshua J. Whitfield, "On Advent Hope and Preaching," *Journal for Preachers* (Advent 2019), 13.

² Whitfield, 13.

notably, neither the parent nor the child were wearing hats or mittens. “Mom,” the child said, “people at school make fun of me because we are poor.” “Well, you know what?” the mother responded, “just because we are poor does not make us lesser than anyone else.” As I heard that story, I immediately thought about Mary. Perhaps you remember the occasion, as well, when Jesus was growing in status and recognition and someone asked, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” That’s the same kind of put down, isn’t it?

I have now served as a Presbyterian minister for 13 years. And while I am proudly steeped in the Reformed tradition, I find much to appreciate in one of Pope Francis’ Christmastime reflections. “Isaiah’s prophecy,” he writes, “announces the rising of a great light which breaks through the night. This light is born in Bethlehem and is welcomed by the loving arms of Mary, by the love of Joseph, by the wonder of the shepherds. When the angels announced the birth of the Redeemer to the shepherds, they did so with these words: ‘This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger’ (Luke 2:12). The ‘sign’ is in fact the humility of God, the humility of God taken to the extreme; it is the love with which, that night, he assumed our frailty, our suffering, our anxieties, our desires and our limitations. That message that everyone was expecting, that everyone was searching for in the depths of their souls, was none other than the tenderness of

God: God who looks upon us with eyes full of love, who accepts our poverty, God who is in love with our smallness...”³

In the Christmas message, we find a meaningful word of inclusion. But, so too, we hear a word of challenge regarding whose lives matter and whose stories hold sway. After all, it’s one thing to maintain that everyone is invited to the celebration. And it’s another thing entirely to personally invite those folks that we know ought to be here and make them feel welcome among us.

Impoverished or not, many people arrive at Christmas “exhausted by the material demands of [this season], worn out from shopping and decorating, worried about debts incurred or family members’ hopes disappointed. Even in the church, attention... may veer away from the central Christian story and work of welcome in favor of demanding perfection in decor and music.”⁴

Yet, as Anna Olson reminds us, “even if the choir hits the occasional sour note or someone’s idea of beautiful clashes with someone else’s in the congregation, Christmas comes in all its power when we open up the Bible once more. The

³ Pope Francis, “Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord” from December 24, 2014.

⁴ Anna Olson, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year A, Volume 1*, ed. Joel B. Green, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 74-75.

unexpected arrival of the Messiah in the form of a baby from a poor family, born in a manger to unmarried parents, speaks directly to the ways that the gospel story consistently deviates from claims of respectability and prioritization of social stability.”

Yes. “Whether or not the home is beautifully decorated, the tree stocked with gifts, a perfect meal under preparation, the harmonious family gathered in love and joy, Christmas Eve in the church is a time when anyone... can find room at the Christmas table. Christ is born for the lonely, the broke, the disorganized, and the conflicted, just as for those who better fit society’s measures. ⁵

After overhearing that young child tell her mother about the pain caused by the ridicule of his classmates, the church member I mentioned earlier returned to the same location the following day, just outside the schoolyard, bearing hats and mittens in a sign of common humanity born in Christian love. Friends, may we be so inspired to give of ourselves to the glory of God. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁵ Olson, 75.