

Nov 29 – First Sunday in Advent

Mary Had a Baby

Emmanuel

Luke 1:30-31, Matthew 1:18-25

Last fall I came across an Advent study called “Mary had a Baby.” It is a study of the themes of Advent based on African American Spirituals. By the time I had the book it was too late to do anything with it because I not only wanted to preach from it but I wanted the choir to help me by sharing the spirituals mentioned in the study.

During this year as I did some research I came to understand that African American spirituals are uniquely suited to help us hear the messages of hope, faith, love, justice and liberation that are part of this season. Spirituals identify with those experiencing a world of cruelty, injustice, poverty, racism and oppression. As Christianity began to enter the African slave community they readily identified with a baby born in a manger; a baby born far from home because of the oppression of overseers. They also heard the good news of liberation as being for them since they were so like baby Jesus. They began to sing their faith and their hope. These were radical songs of defiance. Many slave owners were worried that the Christian messages of love, forgiveness, and equality would cause slave revolts and so banned the faith from being proclaimed on their plantations. They were afraid of the messages of freedom found in the Old Testament stories of the Israelite slaves fleeing bondage in Egypt and so tried most of all to keep those stories from them. Yet the slaves heard the Good News. They sang their faith and most slave owners didn't pay much attention to these African Christmas carols. After all, songs about baby Jesus and shepherds and wise men are not threatening, or are they? Over the next weeks we are going to hear and sing about a Jesus who, together with God, came to pull down the powerful, uplift the lowly, feed the hungry and send the rich away as sung by Mary when she met her cousin Elizabeth. The sweet little Jesus boy, Mary's baby, challenges us even today!

In some versions of “Mary Had a Baby” every stanza ends with the refrain, “The people keep a-comin' and the train done gone.” Spirituals began to become popular at the emergence of the industrial age in this country. Trains connected places and figure

prominently in African American lore. Most scholars believe that this chorus relates to the Underground Railroad with conductors who led passengers, escapees, to safe houses on the way to freedom in the North. The challenge to not be late was a reality. On many plantations Christmas was the one time of year in which everyone was allowed to relax, making it a better time to attempt an escape. While the slave holders and their guests at the big house were partying, the slaves might try to get away. It was important for the runaways to get to the meeting place on time. Don't be late. Beyond the literal image of freedom the train conjures up the image of heading to a better place, moving toward liberation and opportunity. These are the words that still challenge us today.

By singing about the birth of a Savior so long ago, by acknowledging the arrival of Emmanuel, the enslaved demonstrated an understanding that even in slavery God was present. Even to this day when we sing Emmanuel, we are reminding ourselves that God is with us right here and right now.

We need this reminder and the hope it brings, don't we? We are not dealing with the horrific issues that the slaves, who created this song, were dealing with, but we have those times of struggle and hopelessness. Perhaps this year we have heard distressing news from the doctor and now know our time is numbered in months and not years. We have heard about a grandchild that seems to be headed downward into addiction. We or a loved one is struggling to make ends meet. Advent is a time for us to look back and see how God was at work in the birth of Jesus. Advent is a time to remember that what seemed hopeless was actually the beginning of something wonderful. For after all, what feels more hopeless than a couple being forced to have their baby in a barn because an oppressive leader decides to count them?

We are asked in the midst of that despair to get on board for the train is coming. How can we experience God's presence this Advent Season? We have recently heard the flap over Starbucks decision to not have Merry Christmas on their bright red coffee cups. Many have decried one more moment of political correctness and the taking of Christ out of Christmas. They are talking boycotts. Are they saying that the way to experience Emmanuel this season is tied to the words Merry Christmas on a paper

coffee cup that is used and then thrown away? I recall a posting on social media that came out at this same time. It said if you want to keep Christ in Christmas then you should follow Jesus words and feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, visit the sick, forgive the offender, and comfort the grieving. We experience God's presence, Emmanuel, when we are God's hands and heart in giving hope to others.

Even more, we are to come to hope with a sense of anticipation. For the slaves, every baby born was greeted with anticipation. Is this the one? Is this the new Moses who will lead us out of slavery? Every time a plan was discussed concerning fleeing north they would ask, "Is this the time?" This means living with intentionality. It means living into the future with hope not as a victim.

While neither Mary nor Joseph speak in Matthew's birth narrative, our spiritual today gives Mary back her voice. Mary is questioned. Mary names. Mary acts. Perhaps the powerless slaves identified with the many women of the Bible whose voices and names are often obscured. Perhaps they identified with the strong women like Sojourner Truth who was a conductor on the railway or the women who held their communities together when the men were often sold away. Mary and Joseph did not let their situation turn them into victims. The slaves heard the good news of Emmanuel. They believed that if Jesus was born in a stable, then God cared about them too. As God worked to bring salvation through Jesus, God was still at work to bring them freedom and salvation.

This challenges us with the importance of living with hope, standing up to oppression, finding our voice and looking for freedom. Remember Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani schoolgirl who in 2012 was shot in the head in a botched assassination attempt for speaking in favor of education for women. Her courage led to her being given the Nobel Peace Prize in 2013 and she continues to advocate for education for women in Pakistan and around the world.

After long periods of time, how does one keep hope alive? What does it mean to live in perpetual expectation? That is what is so hard, isn't it? We are reminded at Advent of Emmanuel. We are challenged to be ready for the train and not be late, but at

times we wonder if the train is ever going to come. The world seems to be in a mess and getting worse. We have talked about the struggles we face and those around us. It is hard to wake up today with anticipation and hope, to think perhaps today is the day. If we are not careful we won't even go to the train station! Many a slave, when presented with the opportunity to escape, never went to the rendezvous point. Perhaps they were afraid of being caught, but most of the time the stories that come to us point to discouragement. They didn't believe the conductor would be there. They didn't think there was really a way out. Even some who started the journey north wanted to turn around because it seemed impossible to succeed. Sojourner Truth carried a gun with her, mostly used to keep the slaves moving north, not to protect herself from the slave catchers.

So how do you keep hope alive? You celebrate every moment where you see God at work? You see where you have made progress in your journey or others in theirs. You expect something awesome to happen each and every day. I have a book called Everyday Miracles. The woman expects something miraculous to occur each day and it does! Now the things she writes about might not seem very miraculous to you. She writes about the miracle of being grateful or the miracle of a timely call. She believes God is at work in her life and so these things are reminders and keeps hope alive.

This song challenges us to see what we need to do to bring hope and dignity to others today. It is hypocritical to sing about the Christ Child while failing to be concerned about those who are still enslaved in poverty. The train is coming and we don't want to be late! This song challenges us to live with hope and anticipation. We do this by giving up our despair and seeing the miracles of God at work, in a baby born in a stable to today. This is our train of hope, get on board!