Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

First Sunday after Christmas

December 31, 2017

Neal MacPherson

GOD’S DOWNWARD JOURNEY Luke 2:22–40

 Martin Luther once said, “The gospel is nothing more than the story of God’s little son, and his humbling.” Allow me to repeat Luther’s words. “The gospel is nothing more than the story of God’s little son, and his humbling.” Luther’s words remind us that Christmas has very little to do with tinsel and presents and blinking lights. Christmas has to do with the birth of Jesus, God’s little son, and his humbling. As soon as the child is born, we begin to sense that this is a child who will not receive much goodwill from the world. This is a child destined for a humbling. There will be no upward mobility for this child. This child will be subject to a downward journey.

 *I wonder as I wander out under the sky,*

 *How Jesus the Savior did come for to die,*

 *For poor on’ry people like you and like I,*

 *I wonder as I wander out under the sky.*

 It is old Simeon who gives us the indication of what is to come. At the close of his words announcing his own readiness to die in peace now that the light has appeared for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to God’s people Israel, he blesses Joseph and Mary and the infant Jesus in their arms, and he says to Mary,

 “This child is destined for the falling and the

 rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will

 be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many

 will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your

 own soul too.”

 This child will be humbled. He will be opposed and end up on a cross. If we fail to observe Christmas without this awareness of what will happen to the child Jesus, we will miss the point. And the point is this. When God enters human life in the birth of the child, God does not just come to reside in places of sweetness and light. God also comes to reside in places of darkness and suffering. This is God’s downward journey. And God’s downward journey is important for us human beings. We need God not when life is even and smooth, but we most especially need God’s redeeming presence when the path is difficult, when we are subject to grief and loss and uncertainty, when we encounter in the world events of unspeakable suffering, such as the mass shootings in Manchester, London, Las Vegas and Sutherland Springs, or this week’s tragic fire in the Bronx.

 God does not keep aloof from such suffering. God enters into the suffering and is present in it. You may ask, “Why does God permit such suffering in the first place? Could not God have protected the people, some of them children, who lost their lives in the Bronx this past week? Could not God have saved the six million Jews who were put to death by the Nazis? Could not God have prevented the untimely death of a son or daughter of ours?

 I am not sure these questions can be answered. After all, we are human beings and not God. We need to acknowledge that mystery lies at the heart of life. We must also say that mystery lies at the heart of the incarnation. That God should choose to come to us in the birth of the child and then in his life and ministry, his death and resurrection, is a great mystery. In fact, one of the most beloved Christmas chants expresses that mystery. It is called *“ O Magnum Mysterium”—*“O Great Mystery.” The words of the chant go like this:

 *O great mystery,*

 *and wonderful sacrament,*

 *that animals should see the new-born Lord,*

 *lying in a manger!*

 *Blessed is the Virgin whose womb*

 *was worthy to bear*

 *Christ the Lord.*

 *Alleluia!*

 This morning, I want to suggest that it is the mystery of God’s compassion that lies at the heart of the incarnation. It is out of God’s compassion for humankind and indeed for the whole of creation that God offers the gift of God’s little son and his humbling. It is out of compassion that God makes the downward journey. I use the word “compassion” as a way to describe the essential meaning of love. The word “compassion” is more precise than the word “love.” It comes from the Latin. *“Com”* means “with” and *“passio”* means “to suffer.” “Compassion,” then means “to suffer with.” It is out of God’s compassion, God’s willingness to suffer with us and for us that God chooses to come to us in the birth of the child, and then in his humbling. It is out of compassion for us that God takes the downward journey into our hearts and lives.

 God’s compassion for us and for the earth is a mystery, to be sure, but it also challenges Christianity’s most popular conception of God. Conventional Christianity’s conception of God is that of an all-powerful God, a God seated in the heavens who looks down upon the earth, and determines the fate of each and every human being, and even the fate of the earth itself. God determines whether we will get well if we are sick, or whether we will die, whether we are in for good fortune or whether we are destined for misfortune, whether we will be saved or whether we will be lost. Such a God is all-powerful, all knowing, timeless, unchanging, unmoved. When we pray to such a God, we ask God to intervene on our behalf, and then it is up to God. If we contract an incurable illness, it is therefore God’s will. If we get well, it is also God’s will. God is not unlike a cosmic Santa Claus who gives us what we deserve, depending upon whether we have been naughty or we have been nice.

But God is the God of the downward journey. In the birth of the Christ Child and then in his life, God comes down from on high and enters into the thick and thin of our human existence as a healing and renewing presence. God is not the all-powerful God who sits unmoved in the heavens. Rather, God is the compassionate, loving God who is with us and for us, who is deeply involved in creation, and who chooses to be in solidarity with us. When we really think about it, we can see that compassion is far removed from a power that controls. When I love another deeply, I give up all power and control over my beloved. I allow my beloved to be and become the human being God has created him or her to be.

So it is that we believe that God is compassionate and all loving. This God rolls up his, her sleeves and comes down to earth in Jesus the Christ in order to be present with us in both our joys and our sorrows. This God comes to love us, not to control us. This God is not a God who gives out punishments and rewards, but a God who is in solidarity with us in each and every circumstance of our lives, both in the good times and also in our times of trial.

All of this we begin to see in the birth of God’s little Son and his humbling. Yes, given God’s own compassion for us, it is almost inevitable that this child Jesus himself is destined to embark on a downward journey, a path that will lead to the falling and rising of many, a sign that will be opposed. And if we could just learn all of this in the depth of our hearts, and come to trust this God who has come to us in Jesus the Christ, I have a strong feeling that we ourselves might become a people of love, a people of compassion, a people willing to relinquish all thoughts of power and control in order to be a people with and for others.

May this be our desire as this New Year unfolds. What the New Year will bring we cannot know. But we do have a strong feeling that it will be filled with both joy and sorrow, with both healing and suffering. Yet, because God has made the downward journey to become God-with-us and God-for-us we can face the future, whatever it may bring, with both hope and faith. Thanks be to God. Amen.