

Beacon and Eggs (Luke 1.68-79)
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On this second Sunday of Advent our theme is hope. It is a good thing for us to consider, hope, encompassing many of our most beautiful ideas, and, as we pause to think about it, it may seem like safe territory. After all, who doesn't like hope? Who would object to considering hope? And who wouldn't appreciate a bit of hope in church, the sharing of lessons, carols, or sermons that emphasize hope as our faith teaches it? Hope, of all things, is non-controversial, right?

Perhaps John Murray asked himself a similar line of consoling questions as he stood to deliver his sermon in the small chapel that Thomas Potter had built on his farm.¹ Murray hadn't planned to give the sermon at all, had intended to be at sea, but when his ship struck a sandbar off the coast of New Jersey, he and the other passengers found themselves strangely indebted to this Mr. Potter, the farmer who took them in until the winds might shift and they could pry their ship from the shallows. So John Murray was on the hook to deliver the Sunday sermon, and he must have swallowed hard as he stood to speak because he knew that what conscience compelled him to say was as heretical as it was hopeful. The topic of Murray's sermon that morning was universal grace. He preached that a loving God would not ultimately condemn anyone but would save everyone in the end. People of faith need not live their lives in fear of a vengeful deity, he held. Rather, people of faith were to live their lives in the service of love, carrying the

¹ Charles Howe, *The Larger Faith: A Short History of American Universalism* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1993), 2.

good news of that love to all who had ears to hear. The message was, in essence, “not Hell, but hope.”

When Murray finished preaching, he was delighted to find that his host was thrilled. Potter considered it providential, reckoning that the very reason he had built the chapel in the first place was to hear such a good word as Murray had brought. It was a lovely chance encounter that fortified both men. Soon afterwards the winds changed and Murray set sail. Newly buoyed with confidence, he began preaching a universalist message up and down the Eastern seaboard. Potter stayed on the farm, but his faith had been changed and he would never again tolerate preachers who offered a hellfire that he considered to be inconsistent with a God of love. This was the beginning of the universalist movement in America, a movement that crossed many denominations, including Quakers and a surprisingly high number of Baptists, though Universalism itself eventually became a formal denomination.² There were many different expressions of universalist doctrine early on, but what bound them all was the common belief that love would prevail over judgment. A God of love simply wouldn't send people to eternal punishment. It was an incredibly hopeful message, but, as Murray and its other early preachers learned, it was regarded as a damnable heresy by a majority of people.

Murray found that oftentimes when he arrived to preach somewhere, significant opposition had already been arranged. Local clergy would call for a boycott of the event or challenge him to debate, pamphlets would have been printed and distributed to the citizens, warning them of the dangers of the universalist message, and crowds would

² Ann Bressler, *The Universalist Movement in America, 1770-1880* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 17.

grow strangely violent. In sermon after sermon, Murray found himself ducking as things were thrown at him. Once, in Boston, after dodging a rock that had been hurled, Murray reportedly held up the rock and said, “This argument is solid and weighty, but it is neither rational nor convincing.”³ Another time, hecklers pelted him with dozens of eggs as he stood steadfastly declaring his crazy gospel of love for everyone. The stories go on and on, and they get sillier and sillier, but they are also laced with a certain sadness, born of a series of questions: Why is it that a message of radical hope would provoke such violent reactions? Where is the scandal in saying that the last word of our faith is a love that includes everyone? And just what exactly were people hoping to hear, a message of eternal exclusion or a message of reconciliation and peace?

The answer, of course, is that religious people are not all on the same page. There are still universalist Christians in every denomination, insisting that the idea of Hell is not only inessential to our faith, but, in all likelihood, antithetical to it. I am one of those universalist Christians, my gospel being good news to every single person, Christian and non-Christian alike, but I have noticed with some sadness over the past several years, how curiously unsatisfying this seems to be to a number of my friends and family members. Oftentimes, I find I am still regarded as highly suspect for my unorthodox refusal to believe in Hell. Instead, my religious convictions remain firmly rooted in the here and now, in the hope of living freely and loving fully, as Jesus did, with the days that I have. Frankly, I have found that ideas of both Heaven and Hell pull me away from the here and now; Heaven in a dreamy and possibly wishful way and Hell in meaner and more vengeful projection. I’d just assume concentrate on the present, in the world I do

³ Howe, *The Larger Faith*, 4.

live in, and ask myself how to contribute to the creation of some kind of beloved community here. But that's just me. There are also non-universalist Christians in every denomination who insist that each of us will one day be judged for our actions and/or our beliefs by a God who maintains a certain minimum standard below which it would simply be too embarrassing to go. And here I'm making light just a bit, but this seems easier than pausing to point out the ways that systems of violence and oppression are so often complemented by hierarchical theologies that deal in absolutes and the fear of eternal punishment. All that I'm really trying to get at here is the idea that we live into the theological ideas that we hold. The question, then, is whether we will raise voices of a hopeful, inclusive, and even unorthodox religion or simply go mumbling along with the status quo, hoping that if we bite our tongues we won't emerge with too much egg on our faces.

Perhaps the best litmus test for us might be the question of what we would tell our children. I don't know that John Murray had that in mind when he preached his 18th Century sermon, but I do know that what he had to say would have been suitable for a very young audience. God loves you, was his essential message, followed by some ideas about participating in that love in the world. It is a very similar message to the one we try to give our children here. God loves all of you, we tell the children of Covenant, and then we try to embody that by inviting everyone to be a part of the church, no matter who they are, no matter where they've come from, and no matter what unorthodox views they might hold. What binds us together here is the love not the judgment, which seems to me a very warm sort of universalism. This is a beautiful message for ourselves and our

children, one that we need not apologize for, but rather might learn speak with a smile or even sing this holiday season. Which brings us to a final thought.

This morning's lectionary text contains one of the sweetest songs in our sacred stories, a song sung to a child by an old man who was his father. The old man is Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband, and the baby will be called John, eventually earning the name "the baptizer" or, more accurately, "the dipper." John will grow up to be a kind of prophet, but, before he does, he will hear the raspy voice of his father intoning a blessing. And if we are still considering hope, then what could be more hopeful than a parent singing to a child? Just listen. After singing a blessing for God, Zechariah sings to his son. "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare [God's] ways; to give knowledge of salvation to [the] people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."⁴ What a beautiful song. And with it, what beautiful questions: How to prepare the way? How to give light to those who sit in darkness? How to be guided into the way of peace?

One way, of course, is to ask ourselves what message of hope we bring. For, traveling along through the year, we now find our Covenant boat stuck on the sandbar of this season, and we have come ashore for Advent to stand in the farmer's chapel and search for a new word of hope. And while we're here, in the presence of our children and each other, it seems a good time to ask if we don't have a universalist Christian message of our own. For we live in a world where the dark nights are long and the egg throwers are

⁴ Luke 1.76-79, New Revised Standard Version.

many. I can't help but wonder if the place couldn't use a few more beacons, preaching the most hopeful message there is: Peace on Earth, Good Will to All.

May we each be stirred by such hope this Advent.