



December 24 and 25, 2010

Christmastide: From Waiting to Wonder
Ruth Haley Barton

Lectionary for Christmas Eve: Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

Lectionary for Christmas Day: Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1:1-4 (5-12); John 1:1-14

Tonight marks the end of Advent and the official beginning of the Christmas season. Throughout this evening, in various candlelight services and intimate family gatherings around the world, we begin celebrating the fruit of our waiting: *Christ our Savior is born!*

But this has been a hard year; in fact, it still is! Political unrest, economic struggle, natural disasters, unthinkable violence and unresolved racial and religious tensions demand that we move beyond sloppy sentimentality to ask the question: What does the coming of Christ *mean*—if anything!—in the face of it all?

In celebration of this holy day, I would like to share a poem from poet and peacemaker, Daniel Berrigan, which answers that very question. Written initially as an Advent poem, (I have adapted it slightly) it is unflinching in naming the harsh realities of our human situation, but at every turn it confronts these realities with the promise and the impact of Christ's presence in these very places.

The impact of this poem deepens with each reading. Referring to many of the Biblical phrases found in our lectionary readings, it affirms the *real-world hope* the coming of Christ brings and the difference it makes to our world. If the message of Christmas is to make any difference at all, it has to make a difference in all the circumstances in which human beings find themselves.

So today, in whatever situation we find ourselves, let us join with our brothers and sisters around the world—those in Haiti still dealing with the aftermath of the earthquake, those seeking to understand and reconcile tensions in Palestine, those mourning the death of missionaries in Iraq, those serving in the military in pursuit of peace, those who confront evil by rescuing women and children from the sex trade, those struggling to survive the economic recession—and affirm the great promises of our faith fulfilled in the person of Christ. Together let us proclaim: *Christ our Savior is born!*

It is not true that creation and the human family are doomed to destruction and loss—

*This is true: **For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.***

It is not true that we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty, death and destruction:

*This is true: **I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly.***

It is not true that violence and hatred should have the last word...

*This is true: **For unto us a child is born, and unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulders, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.***

It is not true that we are simply victims of the powers of evil who seek to rule the world—

*This is true: **To me is given authority in heaven and on earth, and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.***

It is not true that we have to wait for those who are specially gifted, who are the prophets of the church, before we can be peacemakers.

*This is true: **I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young shall see visions, and your old shall dream dreams.***

It is not true that our hopes for the liberation of humankind, of justice, of human dignity, of peace are not meant for this earth and for this history—

*This is true: **The hour comes, and it is now, that true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth.***

So let us move from Advent to Christmas with hope, even hope against hope.

Let us see visions of love and peace and justice.

Let us affirm with humility, with faith, with courage:

Jesus Christ—the Life of the world.

©Daniel Berrigan, 2004. (emphasis mine) Daniel Berrigan is a Jesuit priest, poet, and peacemaker who has been nominated many times for the Nobel Peace Prize. He has written over fifty books including *Testimony: The Word Made Fresh* from which this poem was taken.

* * * * *

Print off the Scriptures for Christmas Eve or Christmas Day (or find them in your Bible) so you can settle into a place that is conducive to quiet reading and reflection. On these holy days, you may wish to modify your practice so you can read the chosen Scriptures with your family or others you are close to. If you are leading services or in other ways serving others throughout today, try to set aside a few quiet moments in which *you* can allow these tremendous Scriptures to capture your own heart and soul before you offer them to others. Remember you are engaging Scripture now for the sole purpose of allowing God to speak directly to your soul.

Read all four passages slowly and reflectively, not primarily to gain information or analyze the texts, but to let the readings for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day wash over you. Take a few moments in silence after each passage. Notice the theme (or themes) that emerge for you and allow them to speak to your life as it is right now.

Christmas Eve

Isaiah 9:2-7

2 The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined. 3 You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. 4 For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. 5 For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. 6 For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7 His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Psalm 96

1 O sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth.
2 Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day.
3 Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples.
4 For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; he is to be revered above all gods.
5 For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the LORD made the heavens.
6 Honor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.
7 Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

8 Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come into his courts.

9 Worship the LORD in holy splendor; tremble before him, all the earth.

10 Say among the nations, "The LORD is king! The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved. He will judge the peoples with equity."

11 Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it;

12 let the field exult, and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy

13 before the LORD; for he is coming, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth.

Titus 2:11-14

11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, 12 training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, 13 while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. 14 He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

Luke 2:1-14, (15-20)

1 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7 And she

gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. 8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" 15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Christmas Day

Isaiah 52:7-10

7 How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."

8 Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the LORD to Zion.

9 Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. 10 The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

Psalm 98

1 O sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things. His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory.

2 The LORD has made known his victory; he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.

3 He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.

4 Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises.

5 Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody.

6 With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD.

7 Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it.

8 Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy

9 at the presence of the LORD, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.

Hebrews 1:1-4, (5-12)

1 Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. 3 He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, 4 having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. 5 For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you"? Or again, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son"? 6 And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him." 7 Of the angels he says, "He makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire." 8 But of the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the righteous scepter is the scepter of your kingdom. 9 You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions." 10 And, "In the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands; 11 they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like clothing; 12 like a cloak you will roll them up, and like clothing they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will never end."

John 1:1-14

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being; 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. 6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe

through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. 14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.