

THE PROCLAIMED WORD

We LOVE Christmas songs, don't we? They make us feel good. They make us feel loved. They make us want to love. I have two favorite songs that I like to hear or sing at Christmas...one is Schubert's *Ave Maria*. The other, goes a little something like this:

**I want a hippopotamus for Christmas.  
Only a hippopotamus will do.  
Don't want a doll, no dinky Tinker Toy.  
I want a hippopotamus to play with and enjoy.**

**I want a hippopotamus for Christmas;  
I don't think Santa Claus will mind, do you?  
He won't have to use our dirty chimney flue, just bring him through the front door, that's the easy thing to do.**

**I can see me now on Christmas morning, creeping down the stairs.  
Oh what joy and what surprise  
when I open up my eyes to see a hippo hero standing there!**

**I want a hippopotamus for Christmas. Only a hippopotamus will do.  
No crocodiles, no rhinoceroses,  
I only like hippopotamuses;  
and hippopotamuses like me too... [!!!](#)**

A Yiddish proverb states, "Love is a fine thing, but love with noodles is tastier." The point is, love isn't just a feeling; it's a commitment. It's action. It's more than how we feel; it's what we do.

In the days of Judah's King Ahaz, there was a military conflict. The prophet Isaiah tells us that the king's heart and the heart of his people collectively trembled like trees in the forest tremble in the wind.

But in response to the conflict that threatened Ahaz's nation, the prophet Isaiah gives a word of hope. Religion at its best doesn't ignore the pain of the world; religion at its best offers hope. To do that, it must name the problems, and engage them.

Religion must be a healing balm to apply to the wounds of the world, or else what good is it to the world?

Isaiah says to King Ahaz, "Remain calm and do not fear; let not your courage fail before [your enemies]..."

Isaiah continues: *God will give you a sign, and the sign is this – a young woman shall be with child and bear a son, and she shall call him Immanuel* (which means 'God is with us'). And this was meant to encourage King Ahaz.

Later Isaiah will say that the child has been born (*unto us a child IS born*) and upon the child's shoulders rest dominion and authority and he will be given royal titles such as Wonder-counselor, Prince of Peace, God-hero, and he will have a reign of peace.

It just so happened that King Ahaz did have a son who would later be known as King Hezekiah. As king, authority and dominion did rest on him. His mother would have been a young woman at the time the prophecy was spoken to Ahaz, and that Hezekiah lived to be king shows that the Ahaz's regime got through the trouble at hand.

Ahaz was able to pass the reigns of government on to an heir, a prince who would work for peace in the kingdom. A prophetic word of encouragement was needed; it often is. And Isaiah, by being faithful to his prophetic role, was part of helping Ahaz get through a difficult time.

Now skip ahead some 700 years.

An anonymous writer is piecing together a story that we now call the gospel of Matthew. He's writing almost an entire century after the birth of Jesus.

The Roman Empire has dominated Matthew's land for about a century, and the person we are calling Matthew does for his community what the prophet Isaiah did for his. He lovingly and courageously offers a word of hope.

If you were Jewish or gay or Jehovah's Witness in Nazi Germany, you'd have some sense of what Matthew's community must be feeling.

If you were around in the 1980s and 90s when AIDS was terrorizing our communities and Metropolitan Community Churches were offering hospital visits and healing prayers and funerals for people other churches wanted to ignore or blame, you'd have some sense of what Matthew's community must be feeling.

If you were African-American, living in the Southern United States in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when racial segregation was legal and considered normative, you'd have some sense of what Matthew's community must be feeling.

If you were living a nightmarish existence in the south of Sudan, you'd have some sense of what Matthew's community must be feeling.

If you were a same-gender loving person in Jamaica, where just being who you are could get you killed, you'd have some sense of what Matthew's community must be feeling.

It's difficult to compare oppressions, but if we have ever had our human dignity discounted or denied, we should be able to have *some* sense of what others who have suffered dehumanizing assaults might be feeling. And if we can have that sense, surely the spirit of human decency compels us to do something to offer hope or comfort or encouragement. Put more simply, surely Love, human or divine, compels us to do something to reduce suffering in our world.

To have turmoil on your doorstep, and uncertainty and anxiety be your constant companions...that was the reality of Matthew's community. And the writer we are calling Matthew apparently found a great deal of empowerment in the words of Isaiah.

He looked at that passage that he had heard dozens of times in his life, and he must have thought, "hey...that's how God works. God's speaks through human courage to offer hope and healing in the moment of difficulty. God works through people like Isaiah to say, 'Don't give up!'" We are the conduit of divine love...what God does for us, God does through us.

And Matthew took that ancient prophetic text and he reinterpreted it and he lovingly applied it to his situation and he found that it could still be used to empower and encourage those who were at the end of their rope.

And so he writes his story about a man who lived his life helping others, who died brutally and unjustly but with dignity and grace, and who somehow continued to live in the hearts and minds of people...who somehow proved to be a living presence even to people who had never met him in life.

And to make the point of how significant this person was, this Jesus of Nazareth, Matthew suggests that from his birth he was marked as special. And he says that an ancient prophecy can be applied to him as well, to give hope and encouragement even still.

Was Matthew present for the birth of Jesus? Of course not. Is his every detail of the event accurate? I for one have my doubts? Matthew is only one of two New Testament writers who believe Jesus' birth is worth imagining, or mentioning.

But Matthew isn't making the case for history...he is making the case for the future! He is saying that it is not too late to summon hope! He is saying, even when things seem bleak, it is still the affirmation of the faithful that God is with us! And if that is true, then we need not give up; indeed, we CANNOT give up. And if we won't give up, we're bound to experience a rich blessing at some point, maybe even a miracle!

Our tenacity, our unyielding commitment to being the love of God in action is our Christmas gift to the world.

If we read Matthew as a whole story, he takes us all the way to an experience we call resurrection, and that experience is the proof for Matthew and his community that our hope will not be in vain. A life of loving action will not let our hope be in vain.

Some of us will think this story is factual. Others of us will not; and yet, whether we believe it is factual or not, we can all believe that it is true. Because it is true that God is with us, and that is the point, the vehemently proclaimed truth of this story. If we can embrace that truth, we will find the hope and the courage to do amazing things.

We will use the power of love to transform our lives. And when enough of us do that...well, it's certainly worth a try. This is the Good News. Amen.

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#### THE AFFIRMING WORD

God is with us!

God is with me.

I am God's love in action.

My hope is not in vain.

I expect miracles in my life.

I expect miracles in my world.

And so it is.

#### THE FINAL WORD

"Everything we want, whatever it may be, is motivated by love...To attract the things we love we must transmit love...[and] to transmit the highest frequency of love, you must love yourself..." – Rhonda Byrne

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<sup>[1]</sup> written by John Coctoasten and performed by Gayla Peevey in 1953.