

The Fifth Act: Hope

- 2nd Sunday of Advent
- December 8, 2013
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Two weeks ago I enjoyed the performance of Our Town by Thornton Wilder put on by our students here in the Lee Center for the Arts. The magic of the play is that you quickly feel that you are not in an audience watching it but are citizens of Grovers Corner, New Hampshire, and that it is about “your town”, your friends, your life. I walked out with another Jesuit at the end feeling that it was not the end but that we were continuing the play, continuing to be active in it, appreciating the preciousness of life and the promise beyond death it opened up for us in our lives. There were three acts to the play; my friend and I walking away were enacting the fourth act.

There is something similar in how our Christian story is the last act of the story of God with humanity. It’s a grand story of five acts. The first four acts are told in the scriptures and we are the actors inspired by that earlier story as we bring the whole drama to its conclusion. Advent brings this out more than any other season. In today’s readings we hear of Abraham, of the Patriarchs, of Jesse the father of David, of Isaiah, of all the prophets, and of the last of the prophets, John the Baptist. They are the actors of the earlier parts of the drama of which we are now the actors in the last part.

There’s a great sentence in the readings of today in the letter from Paul to the Christians in Rome which summarizes the relationship between the story in the scriptures and our final act. Paul says:

“Brothers and sisters: Whatever was written previously was written for our instruction that by endurance and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”

Paul was the earliest writer of what we call the New Testament, before any gospels existed, so when he writes about the “encouragement of the Scriptures” he means what we call the Old Testament or the Hebrew Scriptures.

You and I are called to immerse ourselves in the story and purpose of God with humanity and the world contained in the whole of the Scriptures, the whole Bible, and from this to know our role in the fifth act of this drama. The first three acts are in the Hebrew Scriptures--Act One: Creation; Act Two: Fall; Act Three: Israel. The Fourth Act is in the New Testament: Christ. We are the continuation of the Fifth Act whose beginnings are in the New Testament but is continuing to be written, told, and acted out now: the Church or the People of God today. The story is not finished, though its end in the Kingdom of God is already assured in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which gives us a glimpse and a taste even now of what the end will be: bodily and spiritually being raised up by Christ in the fullness of who we are, together with our brothers

and sisters, in a recreated earth and universe, a “new heavens and a new earth”, handed over by Christ to God.

God is bringing about in and through us the last act of the full story of his love, his people and the world. We are not the audience of this drama, we don't sit in the seats watching it; it is “Our Town”; we are the actors. We should dedicate ourselves to knowing and pondering the scriptures, the first four acts of the drama, immerse ourselves in the scriptures, so that we get the clues of what God is doing, how we are called onto the set, what our characters are. We need to know the earlier part of our story. In this way we can know how we should act in our roles now, as God, the author and director, leads us within this Fifth Act, the time of the Church, towards the conclusion, the Kingdom of God on Earth. Advent places us in this story, at the point of Act Three, Israel, becoming Act Four, Christ, and in this way informs Act Five, our time, our town, our Church.

Paul and all of our readings today show that the central theme of our Fifth Act is hope. Paul says that all that was written in the Scriptures, in the script of the drama of God's great work among us, was written to instruct us, to give us encouragement, that “we might have hope”. Advent is not the season of hope because that's a good place to start in order to lead up to the birth of Christ. Rather, Advent is the season of hope because what we live now in our time, in our act, in how we live and what we bring about under God's inspiration of us, is to live in hope and to spread hope in our world. God is the author of this act, as of the other acts from creation to Christ, but God relies on us to step onto the stage in order for him to act through us. Thornton Wilder wrote the play but it only became “Our Town” through the actors. So too with God and us.

I ask myself and I ask you what it means and how we should live if the theme of our part in the drama is “that you might have hope”.

- I believe it is to know that the night is over and the dawn has come. The rising of the sun and the coming of the day—the Kingdom of God—is assured in Christ's already resurrection—as if it were a light in the East. We can lift up our eyes—however dark it has been—lift up our eyes in assured hope, living gladly, thankfully, confidently. The night is over; the day is assured.
- I believe that to be true to the story of God's drama in our act of the Church, to live in hope, means that we should not fall victim either to pessimism or to political positions about the Church. Rather we should believe that God is acting through us as a people, as through Pope Francis so clearly believes and shows by how he acts. In short, we should be, act, and talk about the Church with hope as God's act of building and serving the coming of the Kingdom of God.
- I believe to live in hope means that we should not look upon our world as made up of a culture of death and a culture of life, as if God were not there in half of it, but that God is active everywhere and that we as his actors or agents of hope can be within the whole of the world and all of its people, with hope, excluding no one.

- I believe, coming closer to home to this Catholic and Jesuit university, that to live with hope means to trust that our alumni carry out God's mission of hope which inspired them in their years on this campus, and to believe—sometimes against appearances—that our cherished current students will have a “future full of hope” and that they will join with God in transforming and recreating a world beyond our own God-inspired efforts.
- Finally, I believe that for me personally and for each of us personally to live in this Christian era or Fifth Act of hope means to face each day, all of life, every challenge and suffering and death itself, not depending on our buoyancy or the fragility of our existence. Rather, we can live with hope, relying on how the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the sending of the Spirit, and God's presence in Christ and the Spirit have initiated this final stage of the story and have made us temples of God-given hope.

In the end, “Our Town” is God's town and our hope is God's promise. Advent is the season of hope because what is coming as the gift of Christ is the very Kingdom of God. Let us play our parts with hope.

[This homily about the five acts of God's story is heavily reliant on the theology of N.T. Wright.]