

The Hopes and Fears of All the Years

a longest night sermon by J. R. Luck

Before moving to western North Carolina, we lived in Portsmouth, VA whose waterfront is dominated by the world's largest ship repair yard. One day I was walking in Olde Towne and I hear - Elisabeth, if will you do me the favor... Disney's cruise line ship "Magic" was in for some work and, as I learned that day, the ship's horns are tuned to play "When You Wish."

*When you wish upon a star; makes no difference who you are
Anything your heart desires will come to you.*

Those notes were first sung by a cricket in 1940 but since then have become iconic. You'll hear them at the beginning of any Disney movie, and of course, come February after the MVP of the Super Bowl is named, you'll hear them again right before the winner tells us, "I'm going to Disney World."

*When you wish upon a star; makes no difference who you are
Anything your heart desires will come to you.*

This week there are all kinds of wishes being wished and all kinds of dreams being dreamed. Visions of sugarplums may no longer dance in our children's dreams, but the thought of chocolate, Hannah Montana and wii gaming systems may cause many a child to rise before the sun. And it's not just the kids. We too wish upon a star. We wish for world peace, or maybe just a little peace and quiet in our lives. We wish for more snow or for no snow. We wish that 2012 will be an easier year. We wish for a winning lottery ticket in our stocking. We wish for a job, or maybe even just an interview. We wish for a good report from those recent labs. We wish for a cure. We wish we hadn't said what we said. We wish we could have said goodbye. We wish we could have done things differently.

Our thoughts, our dreams, our prayers are crammed full of wishes and wants, perhaps more so on this week than on any other. Perhaps it is not surprising then that many consider Jiminy Cricket's star to be none other than the star of Bethlehem. "When You Wish Upon a Star" is considered a seasonal Christmas song in Japan, Sweden, Finland, Norway and Denmark. I will certainly grant to you there's something magical about it. Each night at Disney World there is a fireworks show named... you guessed it, Wishes. It begins with a single flare, a single falling star over Cinderella's castle as the voice of Jiminy Cricket invites you to wish upon a star. And while I'm not much on smaltz, when I am there, watching the "falling star" while listening to Jiminy, even I get goose bumps. What I don't get is the theology.

Let me introduce you to another song called "Laughing With" by Regina Spektor. And in the chorus Regina mockingly sings:

*God can be funny when told he'll give you money if you just pray the right way;
when presented like a genii who does magic like Houdini
And grants wishes like Jiminy Cricket and Santa Claus. God can be so hilarious.*

I wonder, is that what God has become for us? Do we rub on the magical lamp of our faith and out pops Santa... I mean Jesus, who gives us what we want? Growing up lots of folks told me to open my Bible to any page and point to any verse and I would hear what God wanted me to hear at that moment. If that's not magic what is it? Is that what the Bible is about... magic? Is that really what Christmas is about? Is this a time when we celebrate the arrival of our genie who

makes us smile and feel good about ourselves and grants us our every wish especially if we just have enough faith?

I don't know about you, but I don't buy it. For one thing I don't think Mary got her wish. I don't know what she did wish for, but teenagers in the ancient near east didn't wish to get pregnant before they were married. It was a good way to get yourself stoned. And something tells me that Joseph wished to marry a nice Jewish girl. He most certainly never wished to be visited by angels and forced to flee to Egypt to escape the wrath of a despot. And the people of Israel, they most certainly did not wish for a illegitimate baby to be born in a Palestinian backwater village. They wanted the Romans gone and they wanted a military savior to do it; now. The first Christmas, at least on the surface, didn't grant many wishes at all.

Later this week Christians will gather in Bethlehem at the church of the Nativity & at Christmas Lutheran Church. They are a people who have so many wishes. As did their ancestors before them they wish to be free of foreign rule. They wish to move about as they please & go to work in Jerusalem. They wish to go away to school & then come back & start a family on ancient family property. But all of those wishes are being denied to them. If Christmas is about granting wishes then ironically, Christmas has utterly failed the people of Bethlehem.

And Jiminy,... well Jiminy tells us that anything our heart desires will come to us, so pray tell me why are you drawn here tonight seeking some relief for your own suffering or for the suffering of others. I'm sorry Jiminy - you're wrong. In verse 3 Jiminy sings of the wonder of fate, but fate has been utterly cruel and cold to many people here tonight and all over the world.

But here's another song that may and probably will be familiar:

*O Little Town of Bethlehem how still we see thee lie.
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by.*

Why are there no dreams? Have they given up? Why is their sleep so deep? Probably because they're exhausted from eeking out a living. But, and there's that wonderful disjunctive, BUT

*in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light.
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight.*

The hope and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight. That is why we Christians think that God came to us in the form of Jesus of Nazareth. Not to magically fix things, but to be with us amidst all of our hopes and all of our great and many and burdensome fears. Christ didn't come to transcend human experiences, but rather to embrace them and to embrace all of them: laughter and tears hope and doubt frustration and yearning; even birth and death and everything in-between.

So what difference does it make? I don't know; maybe that's where faith comes in for those of us who can believe in the hope of the incarnation. But if I told you I had no questions or doubts I'd lie. But I do believe. I believe that the 4 million Palestinians living under foreign rule, as did Jesus, can find the hopes and fears of all their years in him. There are more than 12 million refugees & displaced persons on the African continent. Jesus spent the first years of his life as a refugee in Africa. I believe those people can find the hopes and fears of all their years in him. Over two billion people have been born into poverty in Asia, just as Christ was. I believe those billions can find the hopes and fears of all their years, in him. God doesn't grant our wishes by lifting us up out of our lives and experiences. Rather, God answers our prayers by coming and being with us amidst our hopes and fears.

God isn't present in some fictional fairy tale. God isn't present amidst the nostalgia of a Norman Rockwell Christmas. God is present in the mundane messiness of our lives, right here... right now. Disney's version of Pinocchio tells us that the Pinocchio dreamed of being more than an animated puppet; he dreamed of being human. That is what we are celebrating here tonight, the dream of becoming fully human.

Once upon a time... Well once upon a time, God had a wish. God wished that we might know of love, and God wished that we might never be truly alone, even in our solitude. And the only way God could really do that for us, was by hoping our hopes and fearing our fears.

I know. Some of you want a genie or a magical cricket and a blue fairy. There are nights I do as well. But fairy tales will only sustain you but for so long in this world. But a God who meets us wherever we are in all of our mundaneness; in all of our chaos; in all of our struggling; a God who understands the hopes and fears of all the years, that kind of God is capable of sustaining us long after the tree has dried out; long after the mall packs away the decorations; long after our children stop believing in fairy tales. That kind of God can stay and sustain us until we breathe our last.

The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight. Thanks be to God. Amen.