

Advent 3
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

December 17, 2017
Rev. Paul Moore

Hope

The American poet, Henry Wadworth Longfellow's wife died from severe burns when her clothing caught on fire. Henry unsuccessfully tried to save her with his own body, burning his own face so badly he could not attend his wife's funeral.

His son, Charles, who went off to fight in the Union army in the Civil War without his blessing and returned home to convalesce after being severely wounded in the fighting. After his wife's death, Henry was a widower with six children, one of whom was wounded in the worst war this country has ever endured.

He penned poem on Christmas Day, 1863, that contains these verses:

Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound the carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn the households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;
"There is no peace on earth," I said;
"For hate is strong, and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

Where was God for Henry Wadworth Longfellow on the Christmas of 1863?

On December 2nd the Rio Grande Borderland Ministries board met at Holy Spirit Church in El Paso. We took reports from the three main regions of the ministry, West, Central and South. Martha Stafford, from Terlingua, TX, told us of a new development in the South. The drug cartels have so threatened people living in the countryside that they are fleeing to Ojinaga, along the river on the Mexican side. They have nothing, and they have created a card-board slum in that city. There is no power, no water, no sewer to where these people live. It looks like a poster from Save the Children, Martha told us.

Where is God in Ojinaga right now?

Where is God absent in your life right now? Where do you long for divine intervention, presence, comfort, protection or vindication? I know you have had them, moments when you've wondered where on earth is God. Take a moment in silence and consider.

The absence of God places us at a crossroads. We can choose hope or we can choose despair.

Longfellow followed those verses with:

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
 “God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
 The Wrong shall fail, the Right prevail,
 With peace on earth, good-will to men.”

The Borderland Ministries board immediately began to discuss how we would respond to the humanitarian crisis in Ojinaga. Someone is checking with the Red Cross to see if they know about it. The Episcopal Hispanic minister in Odessa, TX, has a lot of parishioners from Ojinaga. We are going to communicate with him after the turn of the year to find out if he has connections that can help us bring in aid without endangering these people further. We have a member in Albuquerque who has fostered a relationship with an orphanage in Ojinaga that might be able to help. Perhaps there are ways we can bring hope to these desperate people.

Where does the absence of God drive you to hope? Take a moment to share with your neighbor something in your life where you have hope.

This is Advent 3. The Gospel lesson shows us John the Baptist explaining himself to the Jews. The hope of the coming messiah has galvanized the people. Israel is supposed to be a sovereign nation under God, and yet Greek influence corrupts the people and Roman law seems to sideline the Law of Moses. Things are NOT as they should be. The Messiah, they believed, would come to set all things right again.

Everybody is on pins and needles about John. Is he the long-promised Messiah or not? No, he is not, he says, but, he has come to prepare for his coming. If God has sent the forerunner to prepare the way, then the coming of the Messiah is close, very close! Hope is born in John's message.

There is a dynamic tension in hope. On the one hand, things are not as they ought to be, but on the other hand, we anticipate change, and we have confidence that the change will be good.

Jesus' birth is just eight days away. Powerfully aware of the ways that God seems so absent, we yearn in anticipation for the moment when God shows up in our lives. Turn once again to your neighbor and share your greatest hope for this Christmas season.