**December Reflections, 2020 Vol 43 No 4**

**Christmas: A Story of Hopeful Realism**

**James J. Bacik**

 This year the Covid-19 pandemic has created a special need for Christmas. We are in need of what we can call the virtue of “hopeful realism” that pervades the authentic celebration of Christmas. Hopeful realism avoids the extremes of utopian optimism that refuses to face the harsh realities of life and of a debilitating pessimism that is overwhelmed by the enormity of the dark forces assailing us. It is precisely in facing reality that authentic hope is born and flourishes. At the same time, hope based on God’s fidelity can help us face reality with courage and discern positive signs that often are obscured by the realities of everyday life.

Against those who deny the existence or the severity of the Covid-19 pandemic, the harsh truth is that it has taken the lives of over 1.8 million persons worldwide and more than 300,000 in the United States. Experts project that over 3,000 of our fellow citizens will die on Christmas Day, more American casualties than in the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor or in the 9/11 terrorist attack. Sadly, this rate will continue through the Christmas season and beyond until the vaccines control the spread.

The pandemic has also done immense damage to our economy: the unemployment rate is around 6%; over 10% of households with children report not having enough to eat, with much higher rates for black and Latino families; around 17% of all renters are behind on payments with many in danger of eviction.

 Furthermore, the harsh reality is that our country is badly divided politically. Despite clear statements by administration officials, including the Department of Homeland Security and Attorney General Bill Barr, that there is no evidence of widespread fraud that would overturn the results of the election, a large percentage of the electorate believes President Trump’s repeated claim that the election was rigged and stolen from him. Some elected leaders have still refused to acknowledge that Joe Biden is the president elect. Democracy itself is under attack, as is fundamental respect for truth. Reckless rhetoric on both sides continues unabated.

 The hopeful good news is that Christmas can absorb all the darkness and remain a beacon of hope. The Gospel of John for the Christmas Day Mass proclaims that the Word, with God from all eternity, became flesh and made his dwelling among us. The harsh reality, however, is that the world did not know him and his own people did not accept him. His rejection, however, cannot obscure the hopeful truth that Christ is the “light of the human race,” who “enlightens everyone.” His light “shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (1:1-18). This striking image of hopeful realism reflects the dominant message of the Christmas liturgy.

 At the Christmas Eve Mass, the Church proclaims a passage from the book of Isaiah (9:1-7) filled with both vivid images of oppression and a powerful sign of hope. It was originally written by the influential Hebrew prophet, Isaiah, who proclaimed God’s word in Jerusalem from around 742 to 687 B.C., a very long and consequential ministry dedicated to speaking God’s truth. He was an educated man with aristocratic connections, a gifted writer with a poetic soul and a prophetic preacher with access to the kings of Judah. His deep faith made him a hopeful realist, very conscious of the cruel fate of the Israelites enslaved by the Assyrians, but always confident Yahweh would not abandon his people. From this perspective, Isaiah proclaims a message of hope: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone.” The people in the northern kingdom of Israel, conquered by Assyrian forces in the eighth century B.C., have known “the rod of the taskmaster,” “the yoke that burdened them,” and “every boot that tramped in battle.” Isaiah encourages the oppressed people with a message of hope. Their God, Yahweh, will smash the yoke, the pole and the rod, and will burn the military boots and the bloody cloaks, the symbols of military might.

 Isaiah goes on to identify a specific sign of hope: “For a child is born to us, a son is given to us; upon his shoulders dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father –Forever, Prince of Peace. His dominion is vast and forever peaceful.” Historically, this verse probably refers to the birth of Hezekiah, the son of King Ahaz. Symbolically, it reminds us of other births that brought hope to Israel. For example, the birth of Isaac to Sarah and Abraham in their old age that kept alive God’s promise to form a great people. The birth of Moses, saved from infanticide, gave the Israelites a leader to cooperate with God’s plan to free them from slavery. And the birth of John the Baptist to Zechariah and Elizabeth in their later years, setting the stage for his role as the forerunner of Jesus.

 These birth stories encourage us to recall the birth of Jesus as a story of great hope embedded in the sober realities of Galilean peasant life. The greeting of the angel Gabriel frightens Mary and prompts the obvious question of how she is going to get pregnant since Joseph has not yet taken her from her father’s house to his own. Satisfied with the angelic explanation of the presence of the Holy Spirit, she cooperated with God’s plan, as did Sarah and Elizabeth. Joseph also has to deal with the perplexing reality that his wife has either been raped or was unfaithful. Not wanting to shame her, he decides to divorce her quietly, a clear indication that he already considered himself married, according to the customs of the day. Being a righteous Jewish man, however, he listens to God’s message in a dream and completes the marriage by taking Mary into his own home.

 The story of the census reminds us that Joseph and Mary lived in a region controlled by the powerful Roman Empire and the puppet king, Herod Antipas. Life was not easy for Galilean peasants subject to a threefold taxation by the Romans, Herod and the Jerusalem establishment. Making the approximately 90-mile trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem by passing Samaria by foot could have taken a week or longer, a difficult journey, especially since Mary was in the late stages of pregnancy. The fact that there was no room for them in the inn reminds us that Jesus was often rejected during his public ministry and had no place to lay his head. Mary is forced to give birth to her first-born son in a stable without the assistance of her mother or female relatives. She has to use a feeding trough for animals as a crib for her baby.

 As Matthew’s story of the Magi indicates, the stark reality of the birth gave way to the vicious reality of a powerful, jealous king, Herod the Great, intent on killing Jesus. Joseph, a protective husband and father, once again listens to the voice of God in a dream and flees with his family to Egypt, where they know the difficult life of refugees in a strange land. Even in returning to their native land, Joseph, warned in a dream, could not return to Judea but had to go to Nazareth in Galilee where it was safer.

 This realistic version of the birth of Jesus enables us to celebrate Christmas as a feast of hopeful realism that we need today in our troubled world. In Luke’s Gospel, an angel informs a group of shepherds, social outcasts to be avoided, not to be afraid: “I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord.” The sign of this hopeful event is “an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly hosts with the angel, praising God and singing: “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests” (2:1-14).

 The birth of Jesus in a stable is the great sign of hope. God is faithful to the divine promise of salvation. While the births of Isaac, Moses, Hezekiah and the Baptist represent significant developments in the history of salvation, the birth of Jesus is the supreme sign, which becomes definitive and irrevocable in his death and resurrection. The birth of Jesus takes on greater significance for us precisely because it is rooted in the kind of messy reality that we all know too well. It is a story of faithful Jews who had to work through perplexing circumstances to complete their arranged marriage; who had to accept the unreasonable demands of a foreign power; who had to give birth isolated from all that was familiar; who had to deal with a powerful deranged tyrant intent on destroying their child; and who had to endure the lot of refugees in a strange land. It was their reliance on the promise of God that enabled them to transform the sometime harsh reality of their lives into a sign of hope for the whole world.

The marvelous Christmas story of the birth of Jesus has an inherent power to help us develop and practice the virtue of hopeful realism, needed in these difficult days. This virtue inclines us to accept the full reality of the challenges generated by the pandemic without falling into despair or self-pity. It encourages us to be prudent, patient and resolute as we await the return to some measure of normality promised by the vaccines. It encourages us to recognize and appreciate the various ways the Spirit has been working through co-operative persons: dedicated doctors and nurses who have worked long hours attending to the sick; skilled scientists who have developed remarkably effective vaccines in record time; kind neighbors who have reached out to the homebound; trained counselors who have assisted those with emotional problems; frontline workers who have done their jobs at some personal risk; public officials who have modeled good hygiene; and religious leaders who have encouraged prudent and prayerful responses to the pandemic. Finally, the virtue of hopeful realism, strengthened by our Christmas celebration of the birth of Jesus, prompts us to trust the gracious God, who remains faithful to his grand promise to accompany us on our journey and to save the whole human family.