

## WHAT IS GOD DOING?

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11, OT p. 691  
 Luke 1:46b-55, NT p. 56

December 11, 2011  
 Third Sunday of Advent  
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I felt sad. I was online Monday night, reading about Christmas celebrations in China. As you heard earlier, their customs are new and basically commercial, a sign that you were part of modern China, with no thought of what Christmas really means. And it's our fault. That is how Christmas is portrayed and, for the most part, celebrated in the United States and other western so-called Christian countries. People in other parts of the world learn that way to celebrate Christmas through television, movies and the internet, and in China, they see our decorations and gifts because so many are made there.

I felt sad also, because I know so many people here who used to know better have celebrated Christmas without Christ for so long, the next generations are ignorant about the story and its message of peace on earth. I'm not saying we should require everyone to subscribe to the religious heritage of Christmas B we do need to be careful about how we impose a religious celebration on those who are part of another faith, so that we are respectful of all the ways people find spiritual meaning. There are some, however, who are hostile to anything that comes wrapped in any kind of religion, and that also makes me sad. I wonder if those of us who follow Christ have by our own actions put a stumbling block in the way of those who refuse to acknowledge the spiritual side of life. Christmas is a time when I am clearly confronted by that possibility.

I can't change the culture of our secularized Christmas celebrations, and so I am left with questions B Where is God in all of this? Is God at work even now?

We're not the first to ask those questions, of course. The people of Israel wondered, time and again, what had happened to the promises the Lord had made to Abraham. The last part of Isaiah was written after the return from exile in Babylon, in response to less-than-ideal conditions in Judea. The people were trying to reestablish their cities and rebuild the temple. The good news of Isaiah is that God would be with them in the process of rebuilding, and the people would be planted in the land like oaks of righteousness. Now, oak trees take time to grow, but I can tell you from experience, if an acorn germinates, in its first year its tap root grows down a long way and that little sapling is firmly planted, even in my heavy clay soil. Where is the Lord for those returned exiles? In the planting and the germination and the slow but certain growth B not necessarily in numbers or in stability, but in

righteousness. They would learn to live together in peace and justice as God=s people, in spite of all the problems they would encounter.

I thought about those few Chinese who are Christian, and decided I needed to investigate beyond Christmas celebrations to find out about the history of Christianity there. I knew that many missionaries had gone to China in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. What I found really surprised me. The earliest recorded contact with Christianity was in A.D. 635. A Nestorian monk named Aluoben came from Persia, quite likely, because in later centuries, Christianity was known as Athe Persian religion.@ I=m quoting now from PBS=s Frontline.<sup>1</sup>

In A.D. 781, a Christian monk named Jingjing composed an inscription of roughly 1,800 Chinese characters on a large stone tablet, called a stela, which would become one of the richest sources of information ever discovered about early Christianity in China. [It told about Aluoben and his welcome by the emperor.]

By the time Aluoben=s story was commemorated in stone..., the Old and New Testaments had been translated into Chinese, and monasteries had been founded in several cities throughout China. But in 845, an imperial edict limited all foreign religion, including Christianity. The edict triggered a period of persecution, and, by the end of the Tang Dynasty in 907, Christianity had all but disappeared from China.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity return when the Mongols conquered China. In addition to some of the tribesmen who were Christians, Italian merchants arrived, and the Catholic church sent Franciscan missionaries along the Silk Road.

[Later,] toward the end of the Ming dynasty, a new wave of Jesuit missionaries came to China. They established schools and hospitals, and more or less openly proselytized. The most prominent among these new missionaries was the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci, who learned to speak and write Chinese and managed to become the first Westerner invited into the Forbidden City.

In 1853, a young Hudson Taylor sailed from England to China. He eventually founded the China Inland Mission, whose missionaries wore Chinese clothing and lived among the people without any guarantees of financial support. Other groups also sent missionaries, including both northern and southern Presbyterian churches. In 1949, under the Communist rule, all foreign mission workers had to leave the country.

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<sup>1</sup>BRIEF HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY IN CHINA *from Frontline, PBS*  
[http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/china\\_705/history/china.html](http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/china_705/history/china.html)

In the late 1970's people were again allowed to worship openly in China. I'm quoting from Marj Carpenter, an enthusiastic Presbyterian mission spokeswoman, so enthusiastic that she says "we" to mean the church as a whole, though she wasn't there personally.<sup>2</sup>

I've said this over and over around the church, "Once you're in a place, once you take the gospel into any country, any location, anywhere, it's never lost, even if you do it wrong." One of the shining examples is China.

In the first part of [the twentieth] century, both former Presbyterian denominations spent millions of dollars sending missionaries to China. That was when we had to travel four months on ships and then get in little boats and run up and down the Yangtze River, confusing the Chinese by sending the southern Presbyterians to northern China and the northern Presbyterians to southern China.

But once we were there, what wonderful work we did! We were sent back home on several occasions, and finally, in desperation [after two mission workers had been killed], all of our mission work was brought home....

When we brought all our missionaries home the second time, we wept and we wailed and we gnashed our teeth about all the money and time we had wasted in China. And we didn't just weep and wail that year, we wept and wailed every year. Every time it would come up that we needed money for anything, somebody would eventually get up in a meeting and say, "Oh, oh, oh, if we just hadn't wasted all that money in China. We spent millions of dollars there and now the church is gone."

The church there was never gone. On the very first Sunday it finally went public again, there were 16,000 baptisms. We knew right away that there were still a half million Christians in China....

I was lucky enough to get to go there soon after it opened up again.... The Sunday we were in a crowded church in Beijing, an elderly woman came down the center aisle carrying a box of hymnbooks that she had risked her life to keep hidden for thirty-two years. Would you risk your life to keep hymnbooks hidden?

The hymns in those books were in English and Chinese. We sang through that book for two hours.

Once you take the gospel anywhere, it's never lost. God is still at work. Now, the

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<sup>2</sup>Marj Carpenter, *To the Ends of the Earth* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corp., 1995), p. 8-10.

Chinese Protestant churches are self-governing, by permission of the Chinese government. Others operate more or less underground. The PC(USA) Mission website reports that Aa new relationship has been established with the China Christian Council in a spirit of equality and mutual respect.... Christian leaders in China have emphasized the principles of self-government, self-support and self-propagation in order to preserve the integrity of the church and to guarantee that the door of the gospel might remain open.<sup>3</sup> There are over 50,000 churches and Ameeting points@ open for public worship. Estimates of the number of Christians in China varies, but it ranges from 10 to 12 million Catholics and 20 to 30 million Protestants.

Where is God at work? In places we might never imagine, in underground house churches, in people who have little support for their faith, in places where it is dangerous to say who you are and what you believe. As I learned more about Christianity in China, my sadness turned to thanksgiving, for God is still at work, underneath the craziness of the celebrations we invent, whether in China or in our own homes.

When Mary went to visit Elizabeth, each woman carrying a child of promise, God was at work. From old Elizabeth and Zechariah would come John, the one who would prepare the way of the Lord. Do you believe that new life can come out of what is old? Do you suppose God is at work in a church that has celebrated 115 years and has mostly older members? Maybe the promise of Elizabeth and Zechariah is waiting to be born among us.

From Mary, almost certainly in her teens, would come Jesus the Messiah, the Savior, whose life of self-sacrificing love would bring us to God. Do you believe that those who are young, and new to faith can be the bearers of Christ to us? Maybe something new is waiting to be born among us.

In this Advent time, let us pay attention to what we have already learned B from Orthodox Christians, the seriousness of our spiritual preparation; from Coptic Christians, the joy of faith that blends with daily life; from Chinese Christians, the faith that persists through times of trouble. Know that God is

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<sup>3</sup><http://oamc.nusa.org/ministries/global/newbies-republic-china/>

at work in your life, in the life of your family, in the life of our church and community. May we always look for signs of the life-giving love of Christ among us.

Let us pray. Come to us again this day, O Christ. May we celebrate with joy, for you still lift up the lowly and nourish us with your life-giving Spirit. Amen.