

The Spirit of Christmas Future

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Pound Ridge Community Church

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 23, 2018

Luke 1:39-55

History is full of examples of people who just weren't forward-thinkers. For every Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos, there have been quite a few more people who were not very good at recognizing potential when they saw it. Consider the following examples.

In 1938, *Fortune* magazine shared this insight: "At present, few scientists foresee any serious or practical use for atomic energy. They regard the atom-splitting experiments as useful steps to describe the atom more accurately, not as the key to the unlocking of any new power."

Or, how about this one? Lee de Forest was an American inventor with 180 patents to his credit. He was a brilliant man, who is considered one of the fathers of "the electronic age." But de Forest was perhaps not at his best when he said this in 1926 about an emerging technology called "television": "While theoretically and technically television may be feasible, commercially and financially I consider it an impossibility, a development of which we need spend little time dreaming."

Both of these were outdone by *The Literary Digest*, which published this in 1889: "The ordinary 'horseless carriage' [i.e., the automobile] is at present a luxury for the wealthy; and although its price will probably fall in the future, it will never, of course, come into as common use as the bicycle." This prediction came a mere 20 years before the first of nearly 3.5 million "Model T's" rolled off Henry Ford's assembly line.

I shouldn't be too critical of the people who made these predictions. I've never been the most forward-thinking person in the world where technology was concerned. You do not find me on line at the store waiting for the next generation iPhone. In fact, a techie friend of mine once kidded me that if I had been there when the wheel was invented, I would have been the one saying, "It'll never work."

Fortunately for us all, history is also full of Henry Fords, people who were capable of envisioning a better future – a future that looks absolutely nothing like the present. You can come up with a huge list off these people the top of your head, I'm sure: Edison, Westinghouse, Disney, Gates, and Jobs. There's a familiar term for these people. We call them "visionaries." They were and are people who simply will not be bound by traditional ways of thinking. They are people who

believe that what “could be” does not have to be determined, or even constrained, by “what is.”

Of course, not all visionaries are inventors or business leaders. Martin Luther King, Jr. was one. He refused to accept the traditional thinking about the social status of any race or about the inevitability of racial conflict in American society. Dr. King saw a future that was radically different from the present. He had a dream where people of all colors respected and cherished each other as children of God. He gave his life to start us on a pathway to a reality many said just could never exist. We could also come up with a big list of that kind of visionary, too – Ghandi, Mandela, Mother Teresa.

Christmas is a holiday for visionaries. At its most basic, Christmas is about hoping for, and trusting in, a future that looks nothing like the past. This seems a paradoxical thing to say about a holiday that we celebrate mostly by doing the same old thing – with happy and reassuring traditions like putting up the tree, making cookies, singing old favorite carols, going to the candlelight service – and on, and on, and on.

Yet, what is it that we’re celebrating? The whole point of Christmas is that by being born to us in a stable in Bethlehem, God once and forever shattered human expectations about how our world should be ordered, and about how God planned to be at work in it. God showed us that the future he planned would look nothing like the past. God, the eternal visionary, calls us to be visionaries, too, whether we’ve ever thought of ourselves in that way or not. God calls us to believe in a better future whatever our current conditions. The whole Christmas story is just full of visionaries. We met two of them in today’s gospel reading: Mary and Elizabeth.

Mary is an unlikely candidate to be the mother of God. She is young and without means. Most importantly, she is part of a culture where traditional thinking says that she is a second-class citizen, someone whose life has value only when she becomes someone else’s property by finding a husband. Add to that the fact that she suddenly also becomes a pariah in her society – an unwed mother – in the most unbelievable of ways.

But Mary isn’t buying into the shame that the accepted thinking of the time wants to place on her. She and Elizabeth aren’t fixated on what others might think or say. They’re lost in the excitement of contemplating what might be. When she arrives at Elizabeth’s house, Elizabeth greets her: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!” (Luke 1:42) Mary has the unconventional faith to trust an unconventional God, and, in today’s gospel reading from Luke, Mary sings out, “From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me-- holy is his name.” (Luke 1:48-49) Mary and Elizabeth choose to see beyond the present predicament and believe in a future that is radically different.

The focus of Luke's gospel story is almost entirely on Mary, but we cannot forget Joseph. Much is always made of the faithfulness of Mary, and rightfully so. But think with me for a moment about Joseph. Even though we don't seem to celebrate him as much, I've always imagined that his surrender to God was even harder than Mary's. After all, Mary was who she was in the social structure. She was also pregnant, and there was nothing she could do to change either of those things. But Joseph could easily have given in to the traditional thinking of his time, and been rid of all the uncertainty and embarrassment by simply divorcing Mary. Joseph could have played it safe, and been done with it all. But instead, Joseph did what his culture said he couldn't do. He, in his way was a visionary. He trusted God's promise of a different future.

In a few weeks, during the season of Epiphany, we will encounter the Magi, three learned men from the east. They had been studying the heavens, and all the signs told them that something great was going to happen that would change the course of human history. The King of kings, the Son of God, was going to be born.

We all know the story of how they set out to follow the star with gifts fit for royalty. Finally, their search ended – but almost certainly, not where they'd expected. It was in a dirty stable, where two apparent paupers tended a newborn laid in a trough from which the animals ate. They found the child surrounded by a ragged band of shepherds. There was nothing "royal" about it. Do you think they wondered if they had read the sky all wrong? Yet something made them join this unlikely scene, kneel beside the local peasants in the mud and straw, and present their gifts in worship of the tiny child. Maybe, despite the less-than-humble surroundings, they, too, were able to see a vision of a glorious future.

And, of course, there is the center of all the attention, the baby Jesus, whose existence would defy the world order. He would be a king without a palace or an army. His teaching ministry would contradict all the world's "truths." He would teach us that we lead by serving, find power in weakness, and save our lives by losing them. He would show humanity a future where even what we had always known about death was wrong.

Christmas is for and about visionaries. It's about looking at things differently – about knowing that we serve a God for whom no future is impossible, whatever our present situation. Of course, the fact is that we are living in a time where it is often very difficult to see a future that is anything other than a continuation of our current circumstances. We inhabit a world being torn apart by random violence. We are assailed daily by news of the massacre of innocents somewhere; events that leave our senses reeling and us feeling powerless and unprotected. Many have friends or family who are seriously ill with diseases that science seems incapable of explaining, let alone curing.

But what is Christmas but an invitation to see things not as they are, but as they might be? In today's gospel reading, Mary invites us to see things differently and to find true joy and peace in a new place — in the gift of God's favor. When Mary sings that God "has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant" she announces that God favors us in our lowliness, in our humility, and in our simple willingness to trust him. When the world around us doesn't offer any solutions, God favors us. When the future seems so very uncertain, God promises to do great things for us. It's a promise sealed long ago, in a stable in Bethlehem.

My simple prayer for you is that this year, you may be visited by the real Spirit of Christmas Future. As you await the coming of the Christ Child, make it your mission to look beyond the comfortable sameness of the season to a vision of lives, and a world, made new by the coming of the Christ child.