



breadfortheworld
HAVE FAITH. END HUNGER.

December 31, 2008
Watch Night/New Year
Herman Diers

RCL: Ecclesiastes 3:1-13; Psalm 8; Revelation 21:1-6a; Matthew 25:31-46

Here it is—the premier text for Christians concerned about hunger! It hardly requires exposition, only faithfulness. What is it doing here amidst the revelry of New Year’s Eve and the sleepiness of New Year’s Day? Actually, there may be no better time, no better context for us to contemplate it.

Tonight’s readings suggest three stages of movement and action. Let’s explore them.

First, we can think of ourselves on a threshold. This is the time between—no longer the old year and not yet the new. Such times are dangerous ones, when people are vulnerable. Signs in the New York subway warn riders not to ride between the cars because it’s dangerous. So is the threshold between the station platform and the subway car.

Life holds lots of these threshold moments—puberty, coming of age, graduation from school, the time between jobs, marriage, and death. Every culture has stories and ceremonies to help its members cross these precarious thresholds—initiations, dances and ordeals, masks and costumes, fasts and gluttonous feasts. Even our “secular” culture has its Halloween and Mardi Gras as well as New Year’s.

In the reading from Ecclesiastes, the Teacher in a Hebrew school of thought writes of the alternation of seasons and conditions. He is really quite cynical about whether human beings can make any meaning out of this endless succession of transitions, all of which have their thresholds.

The second movement in our readings gives us a glimpse of the far side of the threshold, the reality what lies ahead. The text from Revelation says, “See, I am making all things new” (v. 5). Like what? The most central element of all this is that God will dwell with mortals. So it will be a place of no sorrow, no hunger, and no thirst, physically and spiritually (see also Rev 7:16 and Isa 49:10). “To the thirsty I will give water” (21:6b). It’s like a fantasy world—too good to be true. Now we are more apprehensive than ever.

The final movement is to take a hard look back. Matthew's Gospel places us at exactly the same location as the Revelation text-the throne of God at the end of this age and the beginning of the next. God asks those who stand at this threshold to take a hard look back at the room from which they have just come. And they find that everything hinges on issues of hunger and thirst! The faithful have seen to the feeding of hungry people and in doing so have demonstrated that the promise of a new world without hunger is no idle fancy but a real possibility. They have provided an assurance that makes it possible to move into the new age with confidence, even in the face of all the apprehension and ambiguity that we feel at the threshold.

The future, after all, is a new heaven and earth, not disconnected from those that God first created with an abundance for all. It also comes as an invitation to all of us to move into the New Year as those who participate in our Lord's life, which he poured out for others, the ones we discover along the margins in our world.

In the mid-1970s, when Bread for the World was still very new, Congress considered the "Right to Food Resolution." Young Congressman Charles Grassley of Iowa was opposed to the resolution. To think that people should have the right to eat if they weren't working for it went against his work ethic and accountability ideals. He graciously accepted the invitation of our fledgling Bread for the World group in the small county-seat town of Waverly to talk about it. That conversation was one of the factors that led Representative Grassley to support the resolution. After all, he also believed Matthew 25; how could it be clearer that everyone, including the least among us, has the right to eat? That resolution has provided the basis for every bit of hunger legislation that has followed. One key element in our ongoing advocacy is to make sure that assistance actually gets to "the least of these," to those most in need.

Children's Time

Written by Larry Hollar

Think about these quotes from Mother Teresa: "We give our whole-hearted free service to the poorest of the poor... Here in the slums, in the broken body, in the children, we see Christ and we touch him... It is a continual contact with Christ in his work, it is the same contact we have during Mass and in the Blessed Sacrament."¹ How might we explain to children that in the faces of very poor people, in children who lack many of the things we take for granted in our nation, Christ dwells? How can we encourage them in the new year to find fresh ways to embrace their needy neighbors?

Musical Suggestions

Prepared by Larry Hollar

In the Bulb There Is a Flower-NCH 433

Standing at the Future's Threshold-NCH 538

Here Am I-FWS 2178

One Is the Body-GC 846

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¹ Malcolm Muggeridge, *Something Beautiful for God* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1971; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1973) 97, 114.