

Spokane Friends Meeting
December 22, 2024
“Through the Flaming Sword”
Johan Maurer

(This is the prepared message. In our meeting today, in the interests of time, I left out the long second quotation from George Fox.)

Hello from Portland! Christmas blessings to all of you and your families, wherever they are!

As I wondered what kind of Christmas gift I might give you through this message, and maybe more importantly, what kind of gift we might give each other in this very unsettled world, the word “hope” kept coming to me.

What hope, specifically? To start off, let me read today’s Scripture:

Luke 17:20-21 (New Revised Standard Version)

20 Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed, 21 nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.”

Is the kingdom among us or within us? All the translations I checked for today gave at least a footnote with the alternate wording. Just for clarification, let me put in a comment on that second verse from my study Bible.

17:21 The Greek words *entos hymōn* are rightly translated in the NRSV as *among you*, though some translations read “within you.” Jesus is not saying to these Pharisees that the kingdom of God is present to them as an inner, spiritual reality already at work in their lives. He is saying, rather, that God’s dominion is already on display in their midst, in the person and ministry of Jesus himself.

This makes sense to me. The “you” here is plural, so the “within you” really means “within you as a group, as a community.” So my gift to you, and your gift to each other, is to look at each other around the room and say “Merry Christmas! Because today is the birth of the King who is among us even now.”

This kingdom isn’t an outward thing that can be pointed at in space, as something external and magical, or like a UFO or a mysterious drone in the sky over New Jersey. Its reality is in the spiritual power and unity that we share, and the commitments we make to God and to each other. And if we don’t seem to share that unity at every given moment of our lives, the next verses in Luke make it clear that some time, and some suffering, will have to go by before this kingdom becomes a universal reality. *But the promise is clear:* the kingdom is among us, in the Body of Christ.

As I think about why we sometimes *can* and sometimes *can’t* point and say “look here, here it is!” or “there it is!”, a wonderful memory came back to me from the Christmas season of 1985. Judy and I and our seventeen-month-old son Luke were in Oslo. I’m not claiming that December is the very best month to visit Norway, but we had stumbled on an ad for a flight and hotel package in Oslo for only \$499 each. Luke, under age two, would cost 10% extra. If we didn’t eat too much, we could take advantage of this package deal for about \$1200. So we went off to the Wayne Teachers’ Credit Union in Richmond, Indiana, and borrowed the money. I’m so grateful now that we made that trip; it turned out to be the one and only time Judy met any of my grandparents.

Mid-December in Oslo is not a very bright place; a weak sort of daylight starts around 10 a.m. and lasts until about 3 in the afternoon. But all the downtown shopping streets were gloriously lit up with Christmas decorations. Luke's favorite word at seventeen months was "See? See?" as he pointed at whatever he wanted us to notice. So the lasting image I have from that magical week was him pointing at those Christmas lights, saying "See? See?"



I know that part of my delight in these memories is the image of childhood innocence and receptivity that they bring back. We probably all have mixed feelings about the holiday season. I certainly do, growing up in a family where chaos and alcohol were part of everyday life, and Christmas didn't protect us kids from that. So those moments of innocence are, for me, very healing. I hope that here, today, we can point at the work of Jesus among us and say, similarly, "See? See?" Even if it takes us a moment to recall our own original innocence.

For all these thoughts we can find reinforcement in our own Quaker history. At the beginning of his journal, in the late 1640's, George Fox wrote about his wanderings as a young man. This was when he was just starting to gather the people who would

become the first generation of Quakers. He had some experiences of God, things he called “openings,” and here’s how he described one of them.

Now was I come up in spirit through the flaming sword into the paradise of God. All things were new, the creation gave another smell unto me than before, beyond what words can utter. I knew nothing but pureness, and innocency, and righteousness, being renewed up into the image of God by Christ Jesus, so that I say I was come up to the state of Adam which he was in before he fell. The creation was opened to me, and it was showed me how all things had their names given them according to their nature and virtue. And I was at a stand in my mind whether I should practise physic [*that is, become a doctor*] for the good of mankind, seeing the nature and virtues of the creatures were so opened to me by the Lord. But I was immediately taken up in spirit, to see into another or more steadfast state than Adam’s in innocency, even into a state in Christ Jesus, that should never fall.

In case this sounds like boasting, he goes on to emphasize that what he experienced is for *everyone*:

And the Lord showed me that such as were faithful to him in the power and light of Christ, should come up into that state in which Adam was before he fell, in which the admirable works of the creation, and the virtues thereof, may be known, through the openings of that divine Word of wisdom and power by which they were made. Great things did the Lord lead me into, and wonderful depths were opened unto me, beyond what can by words be declared; but as people come into subjection to the spirit of God, and grow up in the image and power of the Almighty, they may receive the Word of wisdom, that opens all things, to know the hidden unity in the Eternal Being.

If you remember the Genesis story of Adam and Eve, you’ll recognize the flaming sword as the one God set up to keep them, once they’d lost their innocence, from going back into Paradise and eating the fruit of the tree of immortality. However we might interpret that barrier and how it came to be, I don’t dare say that we can, each

of us as individuals, go back easily through the flaming sword. However, I *am* sure that we can catch glimpses of Paradise, and by our visions and actions we can begin to enlarge the territory dedicated to God and to that original innocence. I'm not kidding—I think every time we act to protect our children, our neighbors' children, whether here in Spokane or in the Gaza Strip; every time we treat each other as equals in the image and likeness of God, regardless of social status; every time we forgive, even when we have seemingly earned the right to carry a grudge; every time we step into this meetinghouse and wiggle with delight at seeing our dear friends again...we catch a glimpse of Paradise and we enlarge its territory.

Is my interpretation of Fox's opening about going through the flaming sword into the Paradise of God maybe slightly exaggerated? Consider this case study—the equality of men and women in ministry. Twenty-five years after that first opening, Fox applies it specifically to this case. Here he's referring to a man named Nathaniel Coleman, who objected to the setting up of women's meetings:

... This Coleman and others, in their opposition, asked me whether it was not the command of God that a man must rule over his wife.... And did not the apostle say, I permit not a woman to teach ? And where did we read of women elders and women disciples ? And it was an abuse to the elders to set up a women's meeting.

But I told them that he and they were but elders in the Fall [that is, after the eviction from Paradise], ruling over their wives in the Fall, but neither he nor they must rule over widows and young women, and other men's wives.

And I showed him that Dorcas was a disciple, and the apostle commands that the elder women should be teachers of good things to the younger; and though the apostle said, 'I permit not a woman to teach nor usurp authority over the man', as also saith the law (for Eve was first in transgression, and such teaching as Eve taught her husband, and usurped authority over the man, is forbidden); yet the apostle also says that daughters and handmaids should prophesy, which they did both in the time of the law and the Gospel; and man

and woman were meet-helps (before they fell) and the image of God and righteousness and holiness; and so they are to be again in the restoration by Christ Jesus.

And thy ruling over thy wife and eldership is in the Fall, for thou art in the transgression and not an elder in the image of God and righteousness and holiness, before transgression and the Fall was, nor in the restoration where they are helpsmeet in the righteousness and image of God, and in the dominion over all that God made.

As we enjoy each other's company this Christmas, every innocent moment of pure companionship, whether in joy or in compassion, enlarges the territory of Paradise. In the imagery of the Lamb's War, we are taking territory from the Prince of this world and rededicating it to the Prince of Peace. We are putting the building blocks of hope that we can go back through the flaming sword and experience the gift of God in our midst, even as we remain very aware of today's dangers. And the most innocent among us might just try to get our attention with that word of pure delight, "See? See?"