

“How Far We Have Traveled”

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Like I said, this was a difficult time to preach - on Christmas morning - and yet, in another way, it is so important. “Because,” I thought, “Who would be here on a Sunday morning that was Christmas Day, except the most faithful people who wanted to be in Christ’s church?” So I get a moment to talk to the faithful, without offending or being concerned about those who are just on the fringes - many of whom come on Christmas Eve - to talk about how we bring hope to a very hurt and saddened world.

I was watching TV this week as I was getting ready for work, and on the CBS Morning News program there was the American Cardinal Timothy Dolan, from the Boston area. He was talking to the news people. They asked him about what makes Christmas meaningful even today - when so many people are turning away from the faith, when there are all of these problems in the world.

He said an interesting thing: He said, “Because people are searching for hope. They need hope.” And, he said, “Many Catholic theologians, today, are willing to say that hope is even more important than faith.”

I thought that was an interesting comment, especially for a Roman Catholic Cardinal. He went on to say, “Because people can lose their faith and find it again. But, if they lose hope they don’t even try [to find it].” I thought that was so incredibly profound. He then said, “The role of the Church is to guide people through the dark moments of life - to give them hope. Because if they lose that, they have lost their faith, they have lost life, they have lost everything.”

I thought so much about that in preparation for this sermon because Mary and Joseph never lost their faith amidst all of the trials and tribulations that they faced, even on the night in which they had the joy of having their child; who they knew from angelic presence was the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And yet, they had the trial and tribulation of having that child in a stable, and then on this day or the very day or two later, they realized they had to flee to Egypt. That language is so important for today, because Mary and Joseph - the mother and father of our Lord Jesus Christ - became people fleeing, became refugees to Egypt. When they arrived in Egypt they were either legal, or perhaps even illegal, immigrants to this new land of Egypt. They were displaced. There was nothing said about having family in Egypt. Only by the very hand of God, I’m sure, were they even able to eke out an existence in this foreign land, that they had spent centuries fighting with the people of Israel. And yet God provided them hope, and allowed them to survive in this very alien world, and provided them with peace. That same hope is something we all in this world need so desperately.

In my second church, in northwest Indiana, I had a very interesting member and a very faithful loving man. He was from Syria and was a very devout Christian. You see, before extremists in the Muslim community really took over the Middle East, there was a large Christian community. Even today, 10 percent of Egypt are Coptic Christians. If you listen

to the news, the extremist Muslims are blowing up a number of those churches - killing their ministers and priests - but they are still sticking with it.

When I was in Israel, back in the 1990s, there was a Palestinian Christian movement that had been around as long as Christianity itself. The earliest churches - the *very* earliest churches - were in and around Jerusalem, and there was a 10 percent Christian population in Israel in the 1990s. Now it is down to about one percent, but they still eke out hope and the opportunity for renewal.

But when my Syrian friend talked to me back in the 1990s, without any understanding that I would 20 years later be talking about this on a Christmas morning, I was awed by his faith. When he was about 16 or 17 years old, he and his family had to flee Syria, because the Muslims they had grown up and around, who loved them, and they cared for, and were in very loving relationship with - many of them became extremists at about that time.

He was 72 back in the 1990s. He is probably gone now, so we are talking about probably the 1920s. There was a huge Christian movement, but extremism, already by that time, was eking its way into Syria, and they fled. He said throughout his life, "I have realized that it was harder to be a Christian in the United States than it was to be a Christian in Syria."

Now think about that. We, who have called ourselves a Christian nation - rightfully or wrongfully - and he - who has lived in both places and in the United States more than he ever lived in Syria by that time - said it was easier to be a Christian in brutal Syria than it was to be a Christian in the United States.

His reason for saying that is, it is so easy to not have to rely upon on your faith in the United States. We have so many benefits. It is so easy to pretend that we are not going to die, that we are not going to struggle, because we don't struggle that much. But when you live in Syria, you have to rely on your faith for your very existence, and for your life after existence on this earth. I said to him, "That is all fine and good. But," I said. "Look at other places. Look at the concentration camps in Nazi Germany, where so many of the people that came out of those camps left without faith, because they said either there is no God, or if there is a God, they wouldn't want to worship a God who would allow such atrocities to happen? So how can you say that it is better in Syria?"

He said, "I can't speak for what happened in the Nazi concentration camps, but I can speak from my own experience in Syria." He said, "There, the people were angry with God, but they never gave up their hope." And, he said, "If we did, we all realized we had nothing but death. Fatalism and death, and who would want that?" He said, "Hope is what we hold on to, and our only hope can come from God. It can't come from politics. It can't come from our economics system. It can't come from anything else but God. When you are in life and death situations - over and over - it burns the Holy Spirit into your heart and mind, and you cannot live without it."

I was so touched because I found that I wanted, as the pastor, to have as much faith as one of the parishioners. He was a living example of hope and, over and over again, he would talk to people in groups about his Syrian experience, the love of the people and how genuine and passionate they were about their faith - whether they were Muslim or Christian. Then he would talk about the joys of the Christian faith, about a God who would

come down and be with us, to experience the joy of a God who was so intimate and caring with us. He said, "That is why my great-grandparents became Christians. Why the Presbyterian Church's mission reached out to our family in Syria, because we could not remain Muslim when we knew about a God who was that intimate, who wanted to be with us this closely. How would you not want that in your life?"

He said, "I believe that the Syrian nation would have become fully Christian, were not for the fear of the radicalized Muslims in their midst. They were so scared of the truth of Christianity. But truth always wins out. It may lose for a time, but God's truth will ultimately win and radicalism will not win the day forever."

Now I'm sure he has passed away by now, in fact I almost hope he has, because he would be horrified by what he is watching on TV, seeing in Aleppo and other parts of Syria where there is nothing but bloodshed. You saw that picture of that tiny, little boy a few months ago, who an aid worker threw onto an ambulance, and he sat there bloodied, with dust all over him from everything that had been blown up. I remember the CNN person was in tears and saying, "Look at him. He isn't even crying. He is beyond emotion." And, yet, even in that there is hope, because the bombs could not destroy him. We can only believe that God can see a way through.

The reason that I wanted to talk to you about this today is, the Christian faith is about being strong - but not militarily. To be a Christian, is to be strong in character. The Christian faith is about being strong in determination. The Christian faith is about being strong in our endurance, without giving up. And in these days, weeks and months, and even years in the future as we seek to be the Church, we need to be strong and not give up our faith, no matter how corrupt the world is around us, no matter how fatalistic we may feel in a moment. Each new day we must pray for the Holy Spirit to renew us and to give us the ability to thrive when all around us are struggling, because if we can thrive in our hard moments, then everyone will know that it is not you or me - it is the Holy Spirit within us.

We may not be able to preach, or evangelize, in the traditional way to everybody and have them change their hearts. The way we do it is by example, and like Mary and Joseph, whose example was hardship, it's in the moments where we go through the most difficulties and still survive, knocked down but still get up, that we proclaim the Gospel the loudest.

And on this Christmas morning, I pray that each one of us, as true followers of Jesus Christ, will be able to see each time we get hit and get up again, that we are a living example of Joseph and Mary. That we are a living example of Jesus, who hung on a cross, but got up three days later.

See, Christmas and Easter is part of just one story. We celebrate a birth of hope, and in a few months, on Easter morning, we will see that hope fulfilled in the Resurrection. I pray this day that, as we celebrate this hope, that we, like Timothy Dolan, will celebrate the fact that we have something to offer that is bigger than conflict on earth, that is larger and more powerful than death, and that will bring us Resurrection for all eternity. That is why we celebrate Christmas morning with such joy and glee. [It] is because we have a hope that surpasses all understanding. We have a hope that is greater than death. We have a hope and a promise in the Resurrection - in life, in death, and for life eternal. May we share, through our actions and our love, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.