

When Hope Is Almost Gone

From the Advent series: Songs Of Liberation

Text: Malachi 3:1; 4:2; Luke 1:78-79

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Well, did you do your assignment? The one I gave you last week?

The assignment was to reflect on my question: How it is that we who are top dogs can sing the songs of liberation of the underdogs?

We established last week that the songs of liberation with which Luke introduces his Gospel are, indeed, the songs of liberation of those who are living in darkness, who are longing to be delivered by the mighty hand of God, and that the famous songs that have played such a critical part in Christian liturgy, the *Benedictus* today, Zachariah's song, the *Nunc Dimittis*, old Simeon's song, and next week, the song of Mary, the *Magnificat*, that those are, indeed, songs of liberation in which a people are crying out to God to make good God's promises to establish justice on the earth and to bring peace to all humankind. The songs of liberation are described very well by a recent author, Richard Horsley, in his book entitled, *The Liberation of Christmas*, in which he points out, I believe, beyond reputation, that the Christmas story is, indeed, a story of liberation which is a story told by those who are underdogs as they hope in the coming of this one to have justice established and peace brought to earth, the transformation of human society, indeed, the transformation of the world. The songs of liberation are the songs of underdogs.

We who claim them today are top dogs. And, if we really understood what we were singing, we would realize that we are calling for the total transformation of the world and that what is being imagined in those songs of liberation is another way for the world to be, which would involve a radical transformation in our own experience in human society. And so, in order that we might keep Advent with integrity and celebrate Christmas honestly, I've asked you in this season to reflect on that fact - that we who are top dogs sing the songs of underdogs, and I think we seldom realize it.

The people of Israel were always a minor pawn in the power brokerage of imperial affairs. They knew a moment of glory with David and grandeur with

Solomon but, outside of that, Israel never amounted to much in terms of an earthly power. They were caught between the great world empires, and yet they had a sense that they were chosen by God to be God's instrument for the effecting of God's will on earth. And as we saw last week, they had ancient dreamers who dreamed of a marvelous world, the Messianic Age. There would be a sprout out of the stump of Jesse, and he would change things. He would affect justice in the land, he would have compassion for the poor, he would bring about a world that was reconciled in all of nature so that the lion and the lamb would lie down together and they wouldn't hurt or destroy in all God's holy mountain, because the earth would be covered with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea. A beautiful picture, and Israel's dreamers dreamed of such a picture, and it was a dream that lodged in the hearts of the people. They believed that, somehow or other, history was moving in a way which eventually would bring about that kind of a reality.

But, it didn't come. There are those beautiful words of Second Isaiah in the 40th chapter of the book by that name, "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people," and the prophet calls out to the cities of Judah, "Behold, your God." There was all of this marvelous expectation as the exiles were going home from Babylon. They believed that this was the time. But it didn't come, and, as it didn't come and didn't come, prophecy moved into the genre of apocalyptic which was a rather despairing understanding of history, believing that history no longer had the potential of realizing their dream. They prayed for the dramatic intervention of God that would damn the wicked and establish the righteous and would bring in the new age of God's righteousness and peace.

Malachi was such a voice. He is around 450, 475 years before the birth of Jesus. The exiles have returned from Babylon. Rather than Mount Zion being established as the top mountain of all the earth with all the nations flowing to it for instruction, they were a poverty-stricken, destitute people. They were still under the dominion of the Persian empire, and their city was lying in ruins, their walls were not built. This was a time that Ezra came to teach them the law again and Nehemiah came to build the walls, and they built a temple. Herod built the second temple. But the community was poor. It was a far cry from the glorious picture of Second Isaiah, and Malachi, speaking to that destitution, that human hopelessness, says, "But, my messenger is going to come."

In fact, Malachi probably isn't the name of a prophet. *Malachi* means literally, in Hebrew, my messenger. So this anonymous prophet is saying into a situation of despair and darkness, "In the name of God, my messenger will come. And it will be a time of judging and refining and purgation, and this will be preparation of the people of God for that great and terrible day of the Lord, a day of darkness and judgment when the wickedness of the earth will be thrown down and righteousness will be established."

Well, we know from our Gospels that the early Jesus movement understood John the Baptist as fulfilling that role of the messenger who is portrayed by Malachi in terms of an Elijah returned. Jesus said John was fulfilling the role of Elijah. And so, this story of the nativity of John and Jesus is woven by Luke into a beautiful tapestry laced with these songs of liberation to give expression to that which was the deep conviction of that early Jewish Jesus movement that now God was present in human form, was moving things toward that culminating act when judgment would fall and light would shine for the people of God, and the purposes of God would be realized.

The early Jewish Jesus movement was convinced that, in this one God was present, God was embodied, God was moving, and the kingdom of God would be effected, and the song that Zachariah sang, the *Benedictus*, celebrates this movement of God in the establishing of the horn of salvation, the one that will bring about salvation, and then he addresses his little child, John, and says that, "You, child, will go before this one to prepare the people who, in the tender mercy of God, will see the sun of righteousness dawn upon them. They who live in darkness in the shadow of death will finally, finally receive this gift of God."

Well, that was the eschatology. That is, that was the understanding of the times, the last times of that community, of that world into which Jesus was born, and when the angel announced the birth of Jesus, "To you this day in the city of David is born a Savior," that Savior we automatically with our Christian ears think of as one who saves us from our sins in order to make us acceptable to God and bring us to heaven. But, in the understanding of that Jewish Jesus community that believed that God was present in Jesus, moving things toward the culmination, that community that believed that it was living on the edge of the end, for them the Savior was one who would salvage them, save them from their enemies, their occupying power, those who taxed them, took their land, abused and exploited them. Salvation in that community's idea had social, political and economic implications. Israel always knew that God forgave their sins. The Psalmist said, "Lord, if you should mark iniquity, who could stand? But, with You there is forgiveness." Read David's marvelous Psalm of confession, Psalm 51, where he acknowledges his sin and says to God, "But a broken and a contrite heart Thou wilt not despise, O God."

It is not Jesus that brought grace. It is not Jesus that brought forgiveness. Israel lived in the reality of a gracious God Who forgave them. But, Israel was also a people that believed that God was to be experienced here and now, in this life, and that God was concerned about their society, about their economics, about their politics. That God was a God Who loved justice and righteousness, Who spoke out through the prophets against all exploitation of people in all systems of domination. This was the thrust of those songs of liberation that came to expression through the Gospel writers as they tried to say what they understood was happening in the appearance of Jesus and, before that, of John. Those songs of liberation were the expressions of a people who longed to have the yoke and

the burden and the oppression of the human situation lifted off their shoulders, who were still dreaming the dream of the ancient dreamer, who said "That day is coming when there will be justice, mercy, peace, equity in all of God's creation."

Well, that's what Jesus was about. Jesus addressed the concrete social situation of his day. He announced that God Who in grace is near to people. He especially embraced those who had been excluded. He made it clear through his table fellowship to those with whom he broke bread, that the embrace of God was as broad as the world and all humankind. No one, the voiceless ones, the marginalized, the excluded - none of them would be left out of the grace of the kingdom of God. And for that he was crucified, because the kind of social vision that Jesus had, with its political and economic implications, is the kind of vision that those who have vested interest in the status quo will not long tolerate, because it will transform human society and, rather than exploitation and domination, there will be community, justice and peace.

Jesus was crucified for his vision, for that which he incarnated and embodied, and they experienced his presence and fully thought that he would return at any moment. That's obvious from a study of the New Testament. They believed that this one who had come, who was crucified, whose living presence they experienced would return and all things would come to their consummation. But, they didn't, did they? It's been now 2000 years, and we don't really look into the sky every morning to see whether or not this may be the day of his appearing. Although, if you travel I-96, there is a billboard where Jesus is in the rump seat of a plane predicting to come out of the blue soon. I can't believe that kind of ignorance, frankly. It is such a terrible distortion of the Gospel. It is the perpetuation of an eschatology, an idea of the last things, which history itself has clearly indicated was the wrong conception, and what it has enabled us to do is to turn the Gospel of Jesus into a salvation cult by which we receive the forgiveness of sins and peace of God and preparation for heaven. We have taken the Gospel of Jesus Christ that was a world-transforming movement, domesticated it into a religious cult by which we find our personal peace while we go on with our lives politically, economically, socially, as though we never *heard* the songs of liberation.

We have been able to take the Gospel with its Christmas story and subvert it into a marvelously beautiful, moving pageant that lacks totally what it really is about, which is about changing the world to reflect the intention of God. So, we still say, "When is the day of his appearing? When that comes out there some way, then it'll all be fixed." As a matter of fact, it would seem to me we ought to go back and listen again to see whether or not it may be erroneous to be waiting for some future act of God to make it right.

Possibly, possibly what God intends is for top dogs not just to sing absent-mindedly the songs of underdogs, but to begin to use their power and resource to implement, to make real, the longing of the heart of the underdog that comes to

expression in those songs that plead for the dawning of light, for the rising of the sun of righteousness, for the establishment of justice and the bringing of peace.

Maybe, maybe we who are top dogs are called upon to be the agents to effect the cry of God's heart that comes to expression through the underdogs. I wonder if God has anybody doing anything today. You know, *Messiah* means anointed, anointed with the Spirit, and *Christ* is the Greek word for Messiah. I wonder if God has any Christs in the world today, any people anointed with the Spirit who are seeking to effect the intention of God in a world that still lies, so much of it, in darkness, with so many people still living in the shadow of death.

Let me make a suggestion; it will probably blow your mind and you will laugh me off the stool. Let me suggest another Jew - Steven Spielberg. You see, I wonder. It seems to me that, to the extent that the church has become a ghetto of salvation when we come together for our own personal spiritual renewal and our own eternal security, where we get our emotional fix through our religious devotion, maybe having become a ghetto and made the Gospel a salvation cult, God says, "Well, if you want to be off in that backwater, okay. Okay. 'Cause it's not bad to pray and sing hymns and worship. In fact, you really ought to be doing that, because that's where you get the vision and the strength to go out and change the world. But, if you're not going to do anything about the world, if you're just going to enjoy this little pipeline you have to me, then I'm going to have to find some people in the strangest places. I'm going to have to find some people, for example, in show biz."

Perhaps a Steven Spielberg, who a couple of seasons ago, two or three, gave us "Schindler's List," who showed us a flamboyant playboy who got gripped in the midst of the Holocaust with the mass murder of the Jewish people and who used his industry and his fortune in order to rescue a couple of thousand of them. If you don't like Holocaust stuff, then don't watch "Schindler's List." But, I wonder if Schindler was not a Christ, doing what top dogs ought to do.

Another film by Spielberg is coming out: "Amistad." Amistad was the name of a slave ship that was bringing slaves from Africa around 1839, and they mutinied, these slaves. They killed the captain and several of the crew, and they impressed the navigators and told them to turn them around and take them back to Africa, but the navigators fooled them and they found themselves sailing into Long Island Sound where they were captured by a U.S. Navy ship and the mutineers, the blacks from Africa, were thrown in the brig and brought to trial. But, in one of the shining moments of the Christian Church, in this case, the Congregational Church, which is one of the merging bodies that forms the United Church of Christ, the church people began to lobby on behalf of these blacks. The faculty and the students of Yale University went to bat for them. Former President John Quincy Adams became their defense attorney. And in one of the better moments of American history, in American church history, these blacks were vindicated, their mutiny declared justified, and they were sent back to Africa, and I just

wonder if someone like Steven Spielberg who can bring us those kinds of stories might not be someone upon whom the Spirit of God is dwelling in order to shake us loose, break us out, help us to understand that we have no business singing songs of liberation if they are simply the caressing of our own satisfied souls, that we who are the rich and the powerful, if not famous, are the ones upon whom it is incumbent to effect in human society the longing of the songs of liberation.

It is that task to which I believe we are called. It is in contemplating that task that we will keep Advent. It is in welcoming *that* kind of a Savior that we will be honest with Christmas, and it is to *that* end that I believe Christ Community must be committed, for who knows but what some of you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this? Not only to sing songs of liberation, but to bring liberty to those who are oppressed, that the sun of righteousness may dawn upon us with healing in its wings. Ah, wouldn't that be something?

References:

Richard Horsley. *The Liberation of Christmas: The Infancy Narratives in Social Context*. Wipf & Stock Publishers, reprint edition, 2006.