

## Tender Mercy With The Dawn of Hope

### 2 – Watching For The Light

Isaiah 40:1-11

Luke 1:57-67

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Second Sunday of Advent

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Back during the Great Depression in the early 1930's a panel of speakers had come to address a black audience in South Chicago. There were no jobs. There was no money. There was little optimism. The experts came to discuss the situation, among them the famous lawyer Clarence Darrow, renowned as the atheist who stood toe to toe against William Jennings Bryan in the Scopes Trial in Tennessee.

Darrow clearly laid out their plight. He described the difficulties they were facing and the seemingly hopeless insurmountable obstacles before them. He saw no future for these poor black people. Then he stopped in his presentation, and said, "And yet you sing. No one can sing like you do. What do you have to sing about?"

One woman in the audience shouted out, "We sing about Jesus!" And with that there was a torrent of vocal response from throughout that audience to Clarence Darrow. He was not prepared for what followed. Shouts blanketed the auditorium, "Amen!" and "Yes!" and "That's right!" They let fly as only a black audience can of the indestructible faith within that sustained them. Clarence Darrow did not know what to make of that. It left him dazed and baffled and, hard to believe, lacking for words to respond. The unexplainable confronted him, a hope that lives above our fears and tears, a sense that God held them."<sup>i</sup>

"And yet you sing! And yet you hope in the Lord." Everywhere these days it seems there are such vast problems and overwhelming challenges, political extremism of the right and left in our nation and many other nations, wars in Ukraine and Gaza, shootings daily across the United States, bone-chilling medical diagnoses, cancer, heart disease, early Alzheimer's, economic decline, Companies reorganizing and letting their long-time employees go, struggles among the Great Powers for world domination, looming fears of atomic annihilation, and more recently the threat of Artificial intelligence and the fear that computers may someday decide to wipe out the human beings who made them.

Last Tuesday evening I was invited to a private showing of 45 minutes of unmitigated horror - unedited filming mostly on body cameras worn by Hamas, of the heinous slaughter by those Hamas terrorists on October 7 who invaded Israel, murdering innocent Israelis in their homes and along highways and at a music festival. I saw innocent people being mowed down in their cars and their beds and kitchens; some

being beheaded. Some being buried alive. It was animalistic. It was savage. It was pure evil. It was of the same character as the Holocaust during World War 2, and while we grieve the suffering and deaths of innocent Palestinians, Hamas must surely be stopped, somehow be stopped for good. How sad that Presidents of three East Coast universities last week were unable to speak with moral clarity before a Congressional hearing on this!

On Thursday evening our Jewish neighbors and friends began the 8-day celebration of Hanukkah, a word meaning in Hebrew "dedication". This is the holiday marking the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem on Dec 14, 164 B.C. after a small band of Jewish fighters led by Judas Maccabees, liberated it from invading Greek forces. Greek forces who had occupied the Temple and were offering idolatrous worship there during wars from 167 to 160 B.C. The story goes that with a tiny container of ritually pure oil they found in the temple they lit the menorah, and it stayed lit for eight days. Central to this Jewish ceremony is the lighting of an additional candle each day for eight days, even as at Advent we light an additional candle on our Advent wreath each Sunday until at Christmas we light the central Christ candle signifying that Jesus the light of the world has come. Our Hanukkah and Advent candles point us to the hope that God will come and give us grace and strength to overcome all forces of evil. God will come and save us. With the Psalmist we sing, "Now O Lord, what do I wait for? My hope is in you." With Paul we sing, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

Amid all the struggles we face, even as did those struggling residents of South Chicago, we sing! Especially at Advent and Christmas, we sing. We sing of God coming to us, coming to deliver us from all our fears, promising to send us a savior. "O Come, O Come Emanuel, and ransom captive Israel." "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus born to set thy people free."

In the Bible we hear songs being sung in these texts of Advent and Christmas by angels, and by a young expectant mother, and today by an old, retired priest named Zechariah. Nine months before the story we just read and sang Zechariah, a priest in Jerusalem was taking his turn in the rotation at the Temple. It was his turn to offer the incense in the sanctuary. Just as he did, he was strangely visited by the angel Gabriel and told that God was about to act. Overwhelmed with fear the angel told him not to be afraid and promised, "Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord."

But Zechariah doubted the angel's message, wanting to know how this can be, since he and his wife were elderly. And for this impertinence the angel struck him dumb, he lost his voice and was unable to speak. Well, he went home and soon indeed Elizabeth became pregnant.

Nine months later Elizabeth gives birth and according to Jewish tradition on the eighth day they gather with their family and friends for the circumcision ceremony. This is the time when the child is given a name and there is a festive celebration, even as today “Vinnie” Vincent Grimaldi has been claimed by God through baptism as Molly and Justin presented him and pronounced to Cort his Christian name. His family and friends have gathered to celebrate! This is for the Grimaldi’s and for us their Christian Family, a moment of joy and gladness we have sung our welcome to this newest child of the Covenant.

When it is time to declare his name, Elizabeth says the child will be called John, as the angel commanded. But the neighbors are puzzled. They assumed he would be called Zechariah Jr. or some other similar family related name. But John? Where did that come from? No Johns in the family. So, they turn to Father Zechariah to see if he will overrule his wife. Motioning for a writing tablet, he writes, agreeing with Elizabeth, “His name is John.” And with that immediately his tongue is loosed, he gets his voice back and he begins to speak. And the first thing he speaks is to praise God with song. There flows this most beautiful song called the Benedictus, or Blessing, which tells us of God’s caring compassionate deliverance.

Interestingly, although Zechariah is singing in response to his confirming the name of his son John, most of the song is not about John but Jesus. Advent is about Jesus. There is so much celebration that goes on this time of year with office parties, and parades and concerts and feasting, and parties, parties, parties, that we can lose sight of the central truth, it is all about Jesus!

I

Zechariah sings about Jesus, **“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David.”**<sup>ii</sup> The mighty savior is not his own son John but his younger cousin then being carried in Mary’s womb, Jesus. Jesus is the one long promised by the prophets who would come at just the right time to deliver his people held captive.

Today we sing and pray for deliverance to come to our tired old world through a mighty savior. There are so many natural and human-made challenges we seek to overcome. We need a savior. We cannot release ourselves. We cannot save ourselves. We need help from beyond. Fleming Rutledge has written,

“If the 20<sup>th</sup> Century has taught us anything, it taught us that civilized humanity is capable of bottomless depths of wickedness hitherto unsuspected. The myth of human moral progress died in Auschwitz. The best thinkers among us know that optimism about human nature is as Ecclesiastes says, ‘the sacrifice of fools.’ (Eccl. 5:1) The Biblical witness is that humanity left to itself is caught in a downward spiral of self-destruction.”

But at a given point in human history, when the mighty Roman Empire occupied Israel God decided to act. God the Almighty Holy One set in motion a series of events, unique miraculous births, of John and Jesus to thrust into the world of the day voices, visions and actions which will become vehicles of healing mercy.

## II

Zechariah sings about Jesus, how **“God spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets of old that we would be saved from our enemies.”** Jesus’ arrival does not just come out of nowhere but come within a direct unfolding line of what God had begun long ago when Jewish prophets and deliverers like Moses and Isaiah and Jeremiah and Micah were raised up and called by God to speak difficult words to the kings and the cultures. “But I’m no good at public speaking” Moses objected. “I will be with you,” God said. “I’m too young,” Jeremiah objected, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.”

Many years ago, through the guidance of youth leaders and pastors and family and friends, especially a group of guys in college, men like Tom Buck, and then, just out of college, during the year I worked in the U.S. Senate for an Arkansas Senator, along with three other fellows, each of us working in similar jobs around Washington, D.C. we met every Friday morning at 6:30 with the Associate Pastor of National Presbyterian Church who gave his time so generously to share eggs and bacon and scripture and a listening ear with us, and wise counsel to help us discern where God was leading us.

This minister, by the name of Chuck Reinhold saw gifts for ministry in me, and he gave me opportunities there at the church to lead, and a few times he sent me out to other congregations to speak when they had called him looking for someone to fill the pulpit on a particular Sunday night, they asked for Chuck, and Chuck sent me.

Through these and other circumstances I gradually grew into a sense of call to ministry and entered Princeton the following year in 1978. Now after 41 years of ordained ministry in four different wonderful congregations, 22 of those years, more than half, right here with you, trying to tell the story, the great story of Jesus and his love, now I will step down at the end of this month and move into the next chapter God is unfolding, along with my secret weapon and beloved life partner Gayle. We have loved so very much this long season with you and love you so much and are so grateful for you, as we anticipate what God has in store both for you and for us in the next season.

## III

Zechariah sings now briefly about his own son John, and the role John will play. **“You, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.”** John is to be Jesus’ advance man, the one who will break up the

hard soil and get people ready for the Savior. John will travel through the regions of Judah preaching repentance and baptizing those who do. One day even baptizing Jesus when he steps down into the waters. John's role will be secondary, getting people ready to receive Jesus. This is the role of all your preachers here – to point, not to ourselves, but to Jesus!

#### IV

And then Zechariah sings these most beautiful words about Jesus.

“By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Here are beautiful promises for a weary people, for a fearful people. God is coming, not in anger but in mercy, not as a warrior but as a servant, a child who will lead us out of darkness and into light, and into the way of peace.

This past year I had opportunity to visit Warsaw, Poland. I saw examples of where the darkness of night had turned to the light of day. I taught a class of international students, coming from countries in South America and Africa and Europe who had come to this Christian College, the Warsaw College of Theology and Social Sciences, to grow in their faith and knowledge, many of them planning to go on and serve as pastors and teachers and missionaries and church planters around the world. It was so inspiring for me to experience the deep faith of these young adults who had come, many of them from such harsh difficult circumstances. I saw dawn breaking through them.

I saw also dawn breaking through a visit to the historic Reformed Church in the center of Warsaw and dinner with the Pastor. This congregation went back to the days of the Polish reformers at the time of the Protestant Reformation in the 1500's. The current church building was erected in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and during World War 2 was surrounded by the Warsaw Ghetto filled with 300,000 Jews, most of whom were gassed in the concentration camps. The congregation who were allowed to continue to worship in the church with the ghetto surrounding them, was able to help the Jews in small ways, slipping them over the wall a little bread, a little cheese and maybe a blanket. Two of the church pastors were executed among the Jews for refusing to sign the Hitler loyalty oath. Now the Ghetto is gone, the Nazis are gone. Now the area around the church is again bright and thriving with restaurants and businesses and apartments. Poland is free! During World War 2 evil was pervasive, yet darkness was overcome by light and liberation and life.

Today in Ukraine and Gaza and Israel, throughout the Middle East and in many parts of the world the darkness of evil is so pervasive. Still the Gospel candle has been lit and is shining. God has not left us but comes with tender mercy and healing wings.

“Light and life to all He brings, risen with healing in his wings.” To all of us God sends his messengers saying- watch, wait wonder, Jesus is coming. He came once as a baby grown to be our Savior. He will come a final time to bring all things and all people who are in him to glorious victorious life, life that is everlasting and eternal. “Born that we no more may die, born to raise us from the Earth, born to give us second birth, Hark the Herald Angels sing, Glory to the new-born King.”

Karl Barth asks us this, and I ask us,

“Dear brothers and sisters, where do we stand now? One thing is certain: the bright day *has dawned*, the son of God *does shine* into our dark lives, even though we may close our eyes to its radiance, His voice *does call* us from heaven, even though we may obstruct our ears. The bread of life *is offered* to us, even though we are inclined to clench our fists instead of opening our hands to take the bread and eat it. The door of our prison *is open*, even though, strangely enough, we prefer to remain within. God has put the house in order, even though we like to mess it up all over again.”<sup>iii</sup>

Friends the dawn has broken, the night of sorrow and death is over. Hope is reborn. Whatever your situation, you can begin again. You can hope again. I close with this prayer of St. Thomas Aquinas about the coming of dawn. Let us pray,

“Light of lights! All gloom dispelling,  
Thou didst come to make thy dwelling  
Here within our world of sight.  
Lord, in pity and in power,  
Thou didst in our darkest hour  
Rend the clouds and show thy light.

Praise to thee in earth and heaven  
Now and evermore be given,  
Christ, who are our sun and shield.  
Lord, for us thy life thou gavest,  
Those who trust in thee thou savest,  
All thy mercy stands revealed.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> David McKechnie, Lets Start Over, p.30

<sup>ii</sup> Lk. 1:68-69

<sup>iii</sup> Karl Barth, Deliverance to Captives, p.40