

DAYSPRING SHINING IN THE SHADOW OF DEATH

Luke 1:67-80

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Luke 3:1-6

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TEXT: Luke 1:78-79 (King James Version) “Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

PURPOSE: To celebrate the light of the world coming in particular to those of us who ‘sit in the shadow of death,’ who for reason of grief or distress wonder if Christmas is blessing for them.

So now we know: this year, the hot toy ticket is Zhu Zhu pets, which are battery operated hamsters with personality. Too bad we learned this too late: we could have snapped up a bunch in August and had quite the fundraiser with them right about now. How come it seems as if every year, some ‘must have’ toy rises to the top of the pile? I thought pet rocks were the best of all– if they were sold out in the stores, all a devoted parent had to do was go outside, find a palm sized rock, and put it in a box. Maybe dab on a bit of paint, and you’re all set.

What’s the point of all this craziness? The point is love. It’s about wanting our children’s Christmas to be really special, to create a memory that will assure the child, no matter what the future might bring, that she is truly special. I still hold childhood memories of coming into our living room on Christmas morning to discover a decorated tree presiding over a Lionel train platform, complete with houses and people and coffee-ground roads, that hadn’t been there when we went to bed after the Christmas Eve church service. I have no recollection whatsoever of my parents napping after Christmas dinner. But from the delight which overcame me as I saw that train circling that tree I do carry a persistent belief that I clearly mattered a great deal to somebody, and it didn’t matter whether it was Santa or Mom and Dad. That’s the kind of thing we want for those we love at Christmas time.

But what we know is that, for many of us in any given December, and for all of us eventually, some painful present reality will cloud the memory, and deflate the spirit, and get us to wondering, right along with Ebenezer Scrooge, whether Christmas is a humbug. Instead of bathing us in the soft glow of candlelight and moonlight on snow, the season has the ability to deepen a pre-existing darkness of financial hardship, of a marriage gone sour, of uncontrolled addictions, and perhaps worst of all, of an open wound of grief, of not having with us the one with whom we most would want to share the season. The community of faith which is the church of Jesus Christ has a sacred responsibility to be sensitive to the possibility that people who are connected to our fellowship may not be sharing the shepherds’ joy at the good news of a Savior born to us, but rather find themselves lost in the

darkness of the shadow of death.

The good news is that our faith reserves its best words for such folk. The faith that flows from Bethlehem's babe is most of all about God being born in places thought to be godforsaken, about light shining, not where the light already is sufficient, but specifically on those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death.

Here's where today's responsive reading comes in. It's a wonderful poem, known as the Benedictus, from its first word in Latin. We sang a version of it as our opening hymn. In Luke's Gospel, an old man named Zechariah, who is a new father, is the one who sings it first. Zechariah the priest doesn't get a part in our Christmas pageants. But he and his wife Elizabeth know about grief, about living in the darkness of unfulfilled hope. The song blessing God for granting divine favor comes at the end of their story. Their story begins in disgrace and disfavor. Both Zechariah and Elizabeth were from distinguished priestly families. They most likely kept company with the upper crust of Judean society. Luke describes them as scrupulously observant Jews, "righteous before God," the kind of people that others would expect God to bless abundantly. But Elizabeth had never given Zechariah a child, which was, in those days, the defining evidence of God's favor. So they had lived out their married lives in a conundrum: on one hand, revered as models of faithfulness, on the other hand, spoken of in hushed tones, pitied for the curse of barrenness. As Luke opens his Gospel, they are already in their senior years. They had celebrated many a birth among their kinfolk. Zechariah had likely presided over the circumcision of many nephews, and the two had celebrated more bar mitzvahs of their generation's children and now grandchildren than they cared to count. Too many times at those festivities, some well-meaning relative would console the couple with words like those which ring hollow in the hearts of anyone who is intimate with emptiness: "Elizabeth! Maybe it's not too late for you! After all, remember how God blessed our mother Sarah with a son in her old age!" And Elizabeth would smile a polite smile, while Zechariah seethed and wished they were not obliged to attend such affairs.

Then came the strangest of encounters. Zechariah was taking his turn officiating at the temple. One day during his time of service, it fell to him to handle the most sacred of responsibilities, that of offering incense inside the holy of holies. He went behind the curtain – perhaps you recall this curtain, it is the one which tore from top to bottom when Jesus died on the cross – and there, alone in the musky darkness, in this strange space where God was believed to be most present, an angel appeared to him. An angel! I like to think that the angel who

confronted Zechariah was a bit of a character, maybe like Earl in *Saving Grace*, maybe like John Travolta's version of the unsaintly angel Michael. Unlike those statues of pure holiness with wings, biblical angels are more like God's sense of humor personified. "Hey, Zechariah, how's it going?" says the angel. The Gospel account describes Zechariah as scared out of his wits. After all, he was just doing his priestly duty, which had nothing to do with seeking an encounter with a divine messenger, if indeed such encounters could still happen.

The angel said, "Do not be afraid." Rule one: if you ever meet an angel, and the angel says, do not be afraid, brace yourself. You are about to get wrapped up in some astounding divine plan. That certainly was true for Zechariah. "Guess what, old boy? Remember all those prayers you raised up to God? Well, here's your answer: you and Elizabeth are going to have a baby!" To which I imagine Zechariah saying to himself, "Oh great! A teenager in my house when I'm eighty years old! Doesn't God understand that some prayers have a statute of limitations, and this one expired about twenty years ago?" But out loud, he said some scripturally correct version of "You've got to be kidding!" To which the angel responded, "I am Gabriel, one of God's closest associates. So, just to prove that I'm not kidding, what you just said will be the last thing you say until you say your baby's name is John." And with that, the angel vanished, and Zechariah scratched his head and finished up with his incensing, and for at least the next nine months, not a word came out of his mouth. I wonder whether Elizabeth took that as an extra blessing on top of being pregnant. Finally, the baby was born, and when Zechariah wrote "his name is John" on a tablet, over the objections of those same well-meaning relatives who thought he should be named after someone in the family, his tongue was loosed, and out of his mouth came the Benedictus.

The story tells us many things, but one thing it says is that God will use whom God will use to accomplish the divine purposes. Not only certain poor shepherds, or magi from the East, or a frightened unmarried peasant woman, but an elderly and somewhat skeptical priest just going through the motions of religion who is not entirely sure whether God is still speaking, or still looking favorably upon God's own people. The child of Zechariah and Elizabeth played a key role in the coming of Jesus. He was the one who fulfilled the ancient prophecies, who proclaimed the coming of the Lord, and who recognized Jesus, his distant relative, as God's promised Messiah. Through the Holy Spirit, Zechariah was allowed to realize this when he announced in his song, "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.

Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high has visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

There you have it: dayspring shining in the shadow of death. The old couple, who had long ago given up hoping for their hearts' desire, now basked in the heavenly light of divine favor. And more, even as God was answering their very personal prayers, God was using them, and their son, to announce the arrival of God's most precious gift, a mighty savior, the light of the world coming into the world.

Sit with that stunning image: dayspring shining in the shadow of death. There, in the valley where the shadows are so deep that no light finds its way, there, in those dreadful places where hope crumbles and desolation thrives, there, where burdens mount and grief drags down, a light dawns that shows us the way to heavenly peace right here on earth. There are people here this morning who are less here than they are sitting in darkness and the shadow of death. Certainly some real estate in those shadows is reserved for those for whom this is a Christmas shrouded in fresh grief. I know a little bit about that: this is my family's first Christmas without my grandmother. Even though, for the past few Christmases, all I shared with Meme was a brief phone call during which she had little to say, I still think of her as presiding over our family's keeping of these holy days.

There are other places in the shadows where people are sitting who are seeing a loved one's health slowly deteriorate, who are wondering whether this might be the last Christmas with everyone who is here now. There is a place for the woman who stopped by this church Friday desperately looking for some organization that would help her make Christmas just a little special for her laid-off husband and teenage son. There is a place in those shadows for the family in which the mom and dad are recently separated and they are jockeying for the best times to have with their confused and anxious kids who are thinking that maybe, just maybe, if they are really good, they'll get to spend Christmas with Mommy and Daddy together. There's lots of people sitting in those shadows, for lots of reasons, some of which are more wretched than we want to be reminded of on a Sunday morning in December.

What Zechariah realized is what is ours now not just to sing, but to share: the shadows of death are no match from the dawning of the dayspring, the light of

the world finally coming into the world in the person of Jesus, born in Bethlehem. That light is the ultimate gift for this and every season. It comes, not in limited quantities, but in extraordinary abundance. It may not be as obvious as a present wrapped and waiting under a tree, but it is, without a doubt, what God wants to give to every one of us, starting with those who have been wondering if there is life beyond the shadows. Even though we may be walking through the valley of the shadow of death, we really do have nothing to fear, because God is present, God-with-us, Emmanuel, Jesus, the light of the world, who overcomes darkness, who guides our feet along the way of peace, and draws us into the light which is the dawning of God's new age.