

A Generous Sprinkling

Text: Isaiah 35: 1-10; Romans 13: 11-12

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All due respect to Biblical scholars . . . I am going to get on Santa's bad list and do something naughty today! I am going to hop around and cherry-pick from the prophetic words of Isaiah we heard moments ago. I am going to take small bits from here and there. And then I am going to compress the images and phrases together so as if they each belong side-by-side . . . and this is what we get:

*Take heed, a Holy Way shall appear!
No traveler, not even fools, shall go astray!
God's people will be restored, redeemed, ransomed!
Deserts will blossom and rejoice!
(Can you believe it?)
The blind will see and the lame will leap for joy!
Thirsty grounds shall spring with water!
Joy and gladness shall be abundant and sorrow and sighing shall flee away!
Be strong and do not fear!
Your God is here!*

What amazing words! These are among God's Advent promises! And, if we listened carefully, we would have heard a generous sprinkling of hope, comfort where life has been difficult, restoration where everything seems asunder, revolutionary thoughts and visions, and the peace that surpasses the absolute best of our best understandings. These are the gifts of Christmas.

A generous sprinkling of hope. I don't know about you, but there are some days when I could really use that! And not just a sprinkling, a full-fledged shower! Not to misunderstand: It's not that I lack hope entirely. It's just that the movements and matters of the world can seem so large and the resources of goodness can seem so small. I wonder: are you ever like that, too?

The Hebrew word for hope is *tiqvah*, which means "the gift of an attitude or an expectation." And hope is just exactly so, an attitude, a perspective, a way of seeing. "Hope is . . . not wishful thinking," the late Vaclav Havel once said. "It is an orientation of the spirit and heart. It transcends the world that is immediately experienced and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons."¹

A friend of mine is a pastor in one of the towns contiguous to Sandy Hook, such that the boundaries of her ministry do not stop at the Newtown border. I know this is very much in our hearts today. Last week she shared tearfully with a few of us: "December is so hard this time. The pain is still so present and the layers of grief are so complicated and deep. They come back full force in an instant. I can keep a hopeful face in public, but then I go home and crumble." I pray that my friend be blessed with a generous sprinkling of hope. And I pray that for all God's world.

Comfort where life has been difficult and restoration where everything seems asunder. These are barely a step behind hope, and we all know the longing - whether it is anchored in our own personal need for tenderness and renewal, or on the far larger stage of the broken places of the world. It is the longing for the saving power of God that makes life whole for everyone.

I think sometimes we forget that the long wait for the birth of Jesus happened at a time that was absolutely starved for restoration. Exile and return, long passed, had shattered all semblance of community. So deep is the longing when an entire people yearn to feel at home again like that. As if that were not enough, the domination of the Roman Empire was crushing to all but the powerful and rich. There was little to look forward to except more of the same. It was a mean time in history.

Or different and much closer. "I'm afraid I will cry at the dinner table on Christmas," she said. "The empty chair where dad used to sit is still very hard for me. As time goes on I don't miss him less, but more."

So comfort, tenderness and the assurance that in God's time, all will be restored: these are profoundly deep, archetypal Advent needs, and we all have them. They come with the package of being human.

Revolutionary thoughts and visions. Because, honestly, we all know that what we really need for Christmas - I mean *really* need *ó* and that is for something quite different to descend *ó* not just for more of the same!

This is the most amazing mystery of the incarnation! That God would do something so out-of-the-box-astonishing as to become as close as breathing in us; and that the Author of the entire universe would care and dare to show up in the form of flesh and bone, love and grace, vulnerable and human as a baby could ever be. I think that many of us have a good bit of trouble fully grasping the radicality of what this could mean. In fact, I think it kind of scares us. And so we opt, as it were, for the cultural promises of Santa and the shallows of consumerism rather than for the commands of the Christ child.

But, here is the truth that lies beneath, and we all know it already. If we open ourselves, the original gift of Christmas will challenge us in profound ways. We can't look at Jesus very long and not get this! "He changed the rules entirely! He taught a revolutionary ethic of unconditional love, practiced forgiveness and radical hospitality *ó* and got himself in a good bit of trouble for doing it!"²

Karl Barth got it right: "Anyone who has really understood that God became human can never again speak and act in an inhuman way."³ Not because God has become one of us in this birth, but because in Jesus, God has become one with us on this earth.

And the peace that passes all understanding. That was so much on my heart and mind as I watched the convergence of very unlikely friends to attend *anything* together *ó* *except* for the memorial for Nelson Mandela! One hundred world leaders,

heads of state who often are at political odds with one another ó each of whom felt the call to honor this one single man.

Maya Angelou wrote a poignant Christmas poem by the title *Amazing Peace*.⁴ I did not read it all, as only in part she says:

*Into this climate of fear and apprehension, Christmas enters,
streaming lights of joy, ringing bells of hope
and singing carols of forgiveness high up in the bright air.
The world is encouraged to come away from rancor,
come the way of friendship.
A harmony of spirit, a comfort of courtesies;
security for our beloveds and their beloveds.*

*It is Christmas time, a halting of hate time.
We jubilate the precious advent of trust.
We shout with glorious tongues at the coming of hope.
All the earth's tribes loosen their voices
to celebrate the promise of Peace.
We, angels and mortals, believers and non-believers,
look heavenward and speak the word aloud.
We look at our world and speak the word aloud.
We look at each other, then into ourselves
and we say without shyness or apology or hesitation.

Peace, my brother. Peace, my sister. Peace, my soul.*

And so . . . a generous sprinkling of hope, comfort where life has been difficult and restoration where everything seems asunder, revolutionary thoughts and visions, and the peace that surpasses the absolute best of our best understandings.

Come, Isaiah's vision and open our eyes! Come, Spirit of God and heal our waiting souls! Come, Lord Jesus, and redeem our lives! May we be so blessed! Amen.

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¹ Century Marks in Christian Century, February 22, 2012, p. 8.

² John M. Buchannan, "Unwrapping Christmas" Christian Century, December 18, 2002, p. 3. Secondary source quoting the words of William Placher.

³ Brian Linard, ed. A Way to the Heart of Christmas. New City Press, 1991, p. 51.

⁴ Maya Angelou. Amazing Peace: A Christmas Poem. Schartz and Wade Publishers, 2008.