

Signs of His Coming

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Isaiah 35:1-10
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Word began coming in Friday morning that something had gone terribly wrong in Newtown, Connecticut. During our final approach to Christmas, it was not something we were prepared for or wanted to hear. As we stayed reluctantly glued to our radios, TV sets and computers, the news was increasingly devastating. Eighteen and then twenty small children were dead along with six of their teachers and school administrators. And this as churches across our country and around the world were preparing for the third Sunday of Advent, the Sunday focused upon Joy. How ironic. With such suffering going on right before our eyes, how could we speak of joy? I must admit I and I suspect many other ministers went back and looked at our service and made some adjustments that it might speak to the need of the moment.

If, however, we think that religious faith is naive, that it is somehow unprepared for such challenges, we need to think again. It certainly can be. It can be so focused upon a be happy attitude, so convinced that painless prosperity comes to those who are faithful that it is shocked beyond recovery by hard times.

I can understand and empathize with those who are so staggered by pain and loss that they are left gasping; and if we are honest, there are those moments that grip us all. There are times when events in our personal and corporate lives can cause us to doubt the existence or at least the presence of a strong and loving God. I have to admit though that I lose patience with those who through an intellectual feat discount all religion because they happen to notice injustice and suffering in the world, as if they and they alone have had the honesty and integrity to do so. Although any faith tradition can be distorted into a simplistic "everybody gets what they deserve" mentality, each of the major world religions has through history struggled deeply and often with making sense out of suffering and tragedy. And that is definitely the case for the Jewish-Christian tradition.

I had little patience, then, as I began hearing self proclaimed experts "explain" the situation in Connecticut to us. One preacher/commentator whose radio program is distributed by a powerful "Christian" organization blamed the violence on the fact that prayer, the Bible, and the Ten Commandments are not taught in public schools. God, he went on to knowingly assure his listeners, didn't stop the violence because God is a "gentleman" who "is not going to go where he is not wanted." Another preacher/commentator/politician attributed the shooting to the fact that "we've systematically removed God from our schools." He went on to add, "Maybe we ought to let [God] in on the front end, and we wouldn't have to call him to show up when it's all said and done" [Michael Sherrard, Faithful America, 12/15/12].

Is that the way it is with God? Was God really absent from Sandy Hook Elementary School—off maybe in a pout somewhere? Did God turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to the terrible events unfolding there? Is that the God on whose coming we wait? Is that the sort of god who calls us to reverence and worship?

In a word, NO!

God is never more present than in the midst of human suffering. True, Israel's prophets insistently rail against the nation's arrogant presumption on God's special favor and the mistreatment of the weak and vulnerable. Isaiah calls the nation to repentance. "Your hands," he charges, "are full of blood" (1:15). He warns of dire consequences if the nation does not repent and change course, but he also reveals a God who is present in the midst of human suffering. Foreseeing a time of excruciating exile when, uprooted from home and tradition, his people would feel anything but hopeful, he recalls another time of anguish. He recalls the Exodus, a time that was definitive for Israel's existence as a people. "Remember the God who sustained your fathers and mothers on the first wilderness journey so long ago?" Isaiah asks. "Remember the God whose faithful presence saw your formation in the wilderness as a whole new people of God? The God who was present to you then is the God who is present to you and beckons you forward today."

The way forward, Isaiah assures them, is not without peril. Mountains of opposition must be leveled and rough and crooked places negotiated along the way. Yet the God of covenant is adequate to the challenge. The way forward resides in the presence of Emmanuel, God-with-us. It is

about one who has traveled the way before, one who specializes in giving power to the faint and strengthening the powerless. So, “strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come and save you’” (35:3-4).

God’s coming calls us to live out of a new reality. In speaking his word of light in the darkness, Isaiah wears no rose colored glasses. His beloved people are teetering on the brink of being overrun by massive foreign powers and the decisions they make in the coming days will determine whether they live or die. Alternating between the expectation of total annihilation and consuming hope, he does not ignore the darkness or pretend it is not there. The light of God’s coming shines on and reveals the realities as they are, lurking there in the darkness. And more, it calls us to live out of that light, confronting and calling forth a new reality as we go.

Isaiah envisioned the salvation of planet earth. The wilderness, he rejoiced, will rejoice and blossom. The blind will see, the deaf hear, the lame leap like a deer, and the speechless will sing for joy. Fast forward now some 600 years. John the Baptist languishes in prison, his hope in the coming of Messiah seemingly languishing as well. Sending a messenger to Jesus, he asks, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” “So what is happening out there?” John is asking. “Where is the perfect world which is supposed to emerge with the Christ?” Jesus responds with a lesson from Isaiah 35: “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.” The sign of God’s presence among us and the sign that we are living from the hope of God’s coming is the hope of a flourishing and healing of the very earth on which we walk and those who are suffering.

The joy of Advent occurs in the middle of and in spite of the difficulties and suffering of our lives and our world. The joy of Advent is not blind to the circumstances that beset our lives and world, but neither is it finally conditional upon those conditions. The joy of Advent, to borrow from the prophet Malachi, “comes with healing in its wings” (4:2).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was not a stranger to suffering, sums it up for us:

Joy abides with God, and it comes down from God and embraces spirit, soul, and body; and where this joy has seized a person, there it spreads, there it carries one away, there it bursts closed doors.

There is, he goes on to say,

a sort of joy . . . that knows nothing at all of the heart’s pain, anguish, and dread; it does not last, it can only numb a person for a moment. The joy of God has gone through the poverty of the manger and the agony of the cross; that is why it is invincible, irrefutable [From *Christmas with Dietrich*

Bonhoeffer, Augsburg Books].

The Gospel of John saw it, too. In Jesus, the Light of God came into the world, and the darkness, trying with all of its might did not, cannot, and will not overcome it. We live from that hope and work every day of our lives to extend that hope to those who are hurting.

So, dare we to speak of Joy during these days of such deep tragedy? Not if we seek by means of that Joy to evade the suffering that wells up around us. Not if we self-righteously assume that we have all the answers and can safely lay the source of that suffering on others far removed and distant from us. The way, the *only* way to the Joy of which Advent speaks is the way of putting ourselves alongside the Christ among the least of these, his hurting children. The way, the *only* way to Advent Joy is by opening ourselves to the pain that surrounds us and giving ourselves to the healing of our society. Advent, you see, reminds us that the God who has faithfully come in gracious deliverance in the past will come in grace in the future. We are not slaves to things as they are. Advent points us toward a future that is not closed, that is not bound to being merely a repetition of the present. Advent points us toward a future that is open to the fresh and continuous grace of God and the day in and day out efforts of God’s faithful people. What more could we ask?