

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
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**“Simple Gifts”**  
**A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth**  
**Second Sunday of Advent (Year C)**  
**December 9, 2012**  
**Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Luke 3:1-6**

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**Jell-O**

Maybe Zechariah is old enough to have known better

because age is supposed to bring with it wisdom, isn't it?

Maybe that is why Zechariah is dumbstruck at the angel's pronouncement.

Maybe as a priest, he should have recognized the biblical typology of Abram and Sarai:

the woman long beyond child-bearing years miraculously rendered pregnant,  
the arrival of a visiting angel of angels to issue the birth announcement,

the calling out of the aging parent in his or her inclination to guffaw.

Maybe the fact that his own name, Zechariah, means “God remembers”

should have been a clue to him that one day God would . . . remember  
and make good on God's covenant promises.

Maybe all those years of reading and studying, worshiping and praying

about the hope for God's covenant completion in theory

blinded Zechariah to its actual concrete arrival right under his nose.

“Unto you a child will be born, and his name will be called, John,” the angel tells him.

Maybe he overlooked the significance of his own son's name:

John means “God is gracious” or “God's gift.”

What visions of God's salvation keep us on the journey of faithfulness, I wonder?

What “gifts” keep our eyes looking up and our hearts *hopeful* in difficult times,  
and make us want to break into ecstatic song, like Zechariah

singing of God's faithfulness and tender mercies

and sighing towards future goodness, peace, and joy?

I want to share a few of those visions, those vignettes

that have kept me on the journey recently

and that have been like *simple gifts of light* to me,

of light shining in the darkness.

Leonard Pitts, Jr., the editorial writer for the Miami Herald,

had an editorial in the paper recently that featured his pastor's mother,

a preacher in her own right.

(Leonard Pitts, Jr. *Durham Herald Sun*. "Jell-O offers a life lesson". Dec. 1, 2012)

It seems she became suddenly ill on Thanksgiving Eve,

was taken to the local emergency room,

and was subsequently hospitalized over the Thanksgiving holiday.

And, as Pitts tells it, while the rest of America was running around in crazed holiday mobs,

trampling over each other to take advantage of midnight Black Friday sales,

or typing their fingers to the nub trying to cash in on the Cyber Monday discounts,

this little old priestess of Zechariah's ilk was hunkered down in her hospital room,

saying grace over two plastic cups of Jell-O.

What great juxtaposition!

It may not even have been her favorite flavor of Jell-O,

but she was thankful that she was coming off the IVs, off the liquid diet,

and was on the road to solid food again and to recovery of life.

Her rough places were about to become smoother.

And, as Leonard Pitts surmises, "There is something to be said for learning to be content

in the face of circumstances you cannot change."

Or, as he quotes songwriter, Don Henley, "The trouble with you and me, my friend,

is the trouble with this nation. Too many blessings, too little appreciation."

Maybe the dawn that breaks upon us from on high will not be a cataclysmic event,

but more like this one single bright moment

that hints, shimmers and glints of contentment and peace.

Please break into song with me, singing:

**"Rejoice, Rejoice, the Kingdom Comes."**

**Rejoice, rejoice, the kingdom comes; be glad for it is near.  
It comes with joy surprising us; it triumphs o'er our fears.  
Give thanks, for as the kingdom comes it brings God's own shalom,  
a state of peace and justice, where all with God are one.**

**Rejoice, rejoice, God's will stands firm throughout all time and space.  
It is a quiet, steady force pervading every place.  
It snaps the brittleness of hate, unties the bonds of greed.  
It hold out love abundant, which never fails our need.**



### **A Note**

Last week's Advent Festival and Alternative Giving Fair  
was a wonderful event.

It had all the bells and whistles and the busy hubbub of a holiday workshop  
as children and youth hustled around, making glittery pine-cone fire starters  
for the fireplace,  
making sticky cake icing Christmas trees out of ice cream cones and Red Hots,  
shaking glass ball ornaments for the tree with colorful glitter inside,  
hammering tin can lanterns that leak pinpoints of candlelight into darkness.

Many things caught my eye and my ear last Sunday,  
but one project was neither noisy nor glittery; it hardly attracted notice,  
but perhaps it was the most important thing we did that day.

At one table near the door, adults and children were stooping and bending  
to write notes of hope to those inmates, men and women,  
in Central Prison in Raleigh, *who sit on death row.*

These, truly, are people sitting in darkness, under the shadow of death—  
and the one pinpoint of light they might get this season will be this little card

coming from someone at First Presbyterian Church of Durham  
who took the time to say, "Wait, watch, Jesus is coming.  
The tender mercy of God, the dawn from on high will break upon us.  
Light is coming into your deep darkness and into my deep darkness.  
Jesus is coming to redeem this broken world.  
Peace is on the horizon. You are loved."

Author Mary Karr has written a poem, a song that I want to share with you  
about her own personal spiritual journey and about how it feels to realize  
the tender mercy of God coming her way, shining upon her, later in life.  
It is called:

### **Disgraceland**

Before my first communion at 40, I clung  
to doubt as Satan spider-like stalked  
the orb of dark surrounding Eden  
for a wormhole into paradise.

God had formed me in the womb,  
small as a bite of burger.  
Once my lungs were done  
He sailed a soul like a lit arrow

to inflame me. Maybe that piercing  
made me howl at birth,  
or the masked creatures  
whose scalpel cut a lightning bolt to free me—

I was hoisted by the heels and swatted, fed  
and hauled through rooms. Time-lapse photos show  
my fingers grew past crayon outlines,  
my feet came to fill spike heels.

Eventually, I lurched out to kiss the wrong mouths,  
get stewed, and sulk around. Christ always stood  
to one side with a glass of water.  
I swatted the sap away.

When my thirst got great enough  
to ask, a stream welled up inside;  
some jade wave buoyed me forward;

and I found myself upright

in the instant, with a garden  
inside my own ribs aflourish. There, the arbor leaves.  
The vines push out plump grapes.  
You are loved, someone said. Take that  
and eat it.

(Mary Karr. *Sinners Welcome*, "Disgraceland", p. 6-7)



## **A Child**

Back at the Advent festival that day, that brilliant Sunday morning,  
there was a beautiful eight-year-old boy here whose life bears witness to love's power.  
Once upon a time, not too many years ago, he would have shied from the confusion,  
run in the opposite direction of the festivities with tears in his eyes,  
unable to handle the crowd or the noise or the movement,  
along with all the other sensory stimulation.

It simply would have overwhelmed him.

But this year, I noticed he was in the thick of the action,  
along with his special friend, Matt Scott, who has been a godsend of a helper  
during Sunday School and worship.

I saw this beautiful child licking the icing on his ice cream cone Christmas tree  
as he wondered and wandered through Watts-Hill Hall,  
pondering his next craft activity, curious and engaged in the day.

His progress makes me want to sing about the power of love to transform lives.

His parents have been his tireless advocates and encouragers.

His Sunday School teachers and his classmates have prepared a way  
for him to be himself and beloved here at church.

And I want what this child has experienced to be a reality for all of our children and youth,  
for those who have had a hard go of it, for those in foster care,  
for those managing life with epilepsy, like my son,  
for those struggling to graduate from high school,  
for those already addicted to substances, for those in mourning,  
for those in the shadow of death.

A child is the form that God chose first to enter into human life,  
to understand our life, and to begin the work  
of loving redemption for all of humanity.

I think the words of the hymn "Once in Royal David's City" express it quite well:

*Jesus is our childhood's pattern, day by day like us He grew,  
He was little, weak and helpless, tears and smiles like us He knew,  
And He feels for all our sadness, and He shares in all our gladness.*

*And our eyes at last shall see Him, Through His own redeeming love,  
For that child so dear and gentle is our Lord in heaven above,  
And He leads His children on, to the place where He is gone.*

God chose a child to first show us the power of divine love to transform lives.

God chose a child by which to make the Word flesh.

God chose a child to become God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God,  
and *came down from heaven for us and for our salvation,*  
as the Nicene Creed puts it.

(Frederick Buechner. *Whistling in the Dark*, p. 30-31)

We also must keep choosing a child—all children, I think—  
as worthy vessels of God's and our most tender mercies.

**Anthem:** "Love Came Down At Christmas"



### **Lost and Found—**

And then there was the story from the local news  
about the man from the Triangle whose dog bolted and ran from him  
seven years ago during a thunderstorm,  
got spooked and split when the thunder crashed, and was not seen again.

(*Daily Mail*, "Owner Reunited With Dog Seven Years After Storm", Dec. 2, 2012)

His dog was a Doberman named BA – what a name!

And when the dog failed to return home, the owner went on with his life,  
picked up, and moved 2,000 miles away to Phoenix.

Fast forward seven years later, a long time of waiting and forgetting about BA,  
an injured Doberman is picked up by the Durham County Animal Protection Staff  
and brought to the Animal Shelter in Durham,

where he is examined and found to be microchipped,  
where he is well-treated for his injuries and not euthanized (thanks be to God),  
and where every effort is made to locate his owner—even cross-country—  
so that dog and owner can be reunited.

And a wag-tail reunion takes place that no one ever expected!

The dog's owner, Dan Kesler, said that even after seven years of being apart,  
his dog remembers him and responds to voice commands  
that he had taught the dog long ago. That's amazing!

Maybe the dog remembers love, like God remembers love,  
like Zechariah should have remembered God's love  
because that was his own name, for heaven's sake: God remembers.

Maybe the dog's name is now GA – who knows?

But I like to hear these stories about things long lost miraculously being found  
and things long forgotten miraculously being recognized after a lengthy absence  
because they give me *hope* that we will recognize Christ like that,  
one day, at our own wag-tail reunion, when he comes again.

That after many years of remembering and obeying his commands,  
after many years of praying and groaning with all creation  
for the shroud that separates us to be lifted,  
we will hear the cadence of his voice, the ring of his familiar words,  
and know that he is the One we have been waiting for all this time.

Here is one more song of praise, for times when words fail. It's called:

## **Advent Stanzas II**

... Saint Paul, too, saw  
The whole creation groaning for redemption.

And will you *intercede with sighs too deep for words*  
Because you love us in our weakness, because

You love always, suddenly and completely, what is  
in front of you, whether it is a leper?

Because you come again and again to destroy the God  
We keep making in our own image? Will we learn

To pray? May our hearts be broken open. Will we learn  
To prepare a space in which you might come forth,

In which, like a bolt of winter solstice light,  
You might enter the opening in the stones, lightening

Our dark tumulus from beginning to end?

(Robert Cording. *Common Life*. "Advent Stanzas: II", p. 72, 73)

**Amen.**