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“When Half-Spent Was the Night”

A sermon by Joseph S. Harvard

Second Sunday of Advent

December 5, 2010

Is. 11:1–10; Ps. 72:1–7; Rom. 15:4–13; Matt. 3:1–12

Dear God, in this Advent season, we are here this morning to hear once again the promise of your coming into history, the promise that you will come into the life of this world and into our own personal lives. So in silence, open our minds and our hearts that we may wait for your coming in confidence that you are faithful. Come to us, speak to our anxieties and our fears; speak to our disappointments and our failures; speak your word of hope to us. Startle us by your nearness, your presence, your love made known in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Some of you know that I enjoy reading newspapers. Some members of my family may say it is more than just an enjoyment. They may even say it is an obsession. Not singular newspaper, but at least two a day—sometimes three, four, including the *Duke Chronicle* and, yes, the *Daily Tar Heel*—but not every day. Carlisle discovered that when we were travelling in Europe, no matter what the weather was like or what happened to our plans for any particular day or whatever we are experiencing: if I could find a copy of the *International Herald Tribune*, I was a happy camper. Nothing else seems to matter. She thinks this is weird. I don't. We have agreed to disagree about this. But I have a theological rationale for my point of view, as you can imagine, which I share with her very freely.

My theological mentor and teacher, one of the best theologians in the last century, Karl Barth, used to say that a Christian should have an open Bible before him or her, and next to the open bible should be the daily newspaper. But there is a problem with this approach. Let me illustrate:

If we open the Bible to Chapter 11 of Isaiah:

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them....
They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain (Is. 11:6, 9).

That is what the prophet Isaiah wrote 700 years before the birth of Jesus.

Think about that in context the daily newspaper:

Rising Dangers Between the Two Koreas, North and South

The Afghanistan War Goes On and On

The Senate Is Divided Over Whether To Extend Tax Cuts to the Rich

The Senate Is Divided Over Whether To Extend Benefits to the Unemployed

That's what the headlines are about in December, 2010.

Advent is a season of dramatic contrasts for those who celebrate the birth of Christ. There is the contrast between the bright lights of the culture year-end winter festival and the quiet, poignant Advent hymns about lonely exile, contrast between the urgency to get it all done before December 24—every present purchased and wrapped, cards addressed and mailed, trees bought and decorated, parties attended—that urging, and the urge to wait, quietly, hopefully, for something that is not yet here.

Advent hope is at the center of this season. But it sometimes seems remote, out of kilter with the hectic pace, the conflicts, the pain and misery, the challenges and

the anxieties of our day-to-day lives. We need that hope, don't we? I need it; you need it, today more than ever.

Years ago, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was jailed by the Nazis. He wrote a letter to his fiancée, Maria von Wedemeyer. This is what he wrote:

My dearest Maria, ... by the time you receive this letter it will probably be Advent, a time especially dear to me. A prison cell like this, in which one watches and hopes and performs this or that ultimately insignificant task, and in which one is wholly dependent on the door's being opened from the outside, is far from an inappropriate metaphor for Advent. (21 November 1943, *Love Letters from Cell 92*, p. 118)

Opening the doors from the outside. Hope, coming to us from beyond us. It is what Old Testament scholar Eugene March calls the defining hope of our faith: that God is with us. And that hope is precisely present with us when we need it most—when we need the door open from the outside.

John the Baptist is not one of my favorite Advent visitors, but you will notice that he comes every year dressed strangely with his tough message: “Repent!” I try to avoid him because he makes me uncomfortable. I don't need to hear about “a brood of vipers” as I get ready for Christmas.

I have my own challenges. But there he is. You notice that I ask Sam to deal with him this morning, and he's did a really good job.

Did you notice that John did bring good news: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2). God's kingdom is in our midst. It is with us. It is that peaceable kingdom that Isaiah talked about, and you will encounter it, I hope, in the next few days and weeks.

Sometime, perhaps next week, perhaps you have already done it, most of you will retrieve from storage and reassemble a replica of the Nativity. We have a beautiful crèche right outside the door of the sanctuary, thanks to Mary Ann Ruegg. In that scene, there is the vision of God's kingdom on earth. Remember, it happens in the

unlikeliest of places: in Bethlehem, the city of David, the king whose father is Jesse. It is a story we know and love of a poor, vulnerable, young woman and her husband, traveling a long distance because the most powerful government in the world, which was ruling over them, wants to count them, to tax them. And their baby is born in the night. He was born into a world in many ways like our own: nations are at war, injustices flourishing, human beings afraid of what is coming tomorrow, people living in pain and suffering. Yet into this world, there comes hope: hope in the form of a child, born to deliver God's people, born to speak to us in all of our anxieties and fears, and to tell us to look up for the doors are being opened from the outside.

This is not a glib hope. It is not a hope that does not look reality in the eye. The Isaiah passage of the peaceable kingdom begins with a scene of desolation that is devastating. Perhaps a battlefield on which the soldiers of Isaiah's own nation were overwhelmed by the powerful armies of Assyria. Perhaps the very place where his countrymen, his own friends, were killed or captured. There were no buildings standing; there were not even any trees left. One of the desolate signatures of war is all the trees are obliterated. There is only rubble, destruction, ugly dry stumps. The prophet is walking through the battlefield. Perhaps there are tears in his eyes. He is looking for someone to open the doors from the outside. And his eye falls on a stump. And out of this stump, there comes a sprig: a tiny green shoot. Something new is happening. There is new hope, new possibility, new potential. He hurries to his home and sits down and writes that beautiful poem: "A shoot shall come forth from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots" (Isaiah 11:1). When half-spent was the night, God sneaked into our world and continues to come.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to Maria: "Just when everything is bearing down on us to such an extent that we can scarcely withstand it, the Christmas message comes.... God is present with us in a manger, light in darkness. (13 December 1943, *Love Letters from Cell 92*, p. 109)

Hope in the face of hopelessness. God is with us at our most tested times.

Someone sent me a card this past week. On the cover, there was a verse from Psalm 62:5—"Find rest, O my soul, in God alone. My hope comes from God."

Now that is something you can take to heart “when half-spent is the night.”

The invitation to you and to me in this Advent season is to open ourselves to the One who comes to open the doors from the outside. The great hope of Advent is to look for Him in a rose blooming in desolate ground, to listen for Him in the darkest, most threatening moments of our lives, “when half-spent is the night.”

This is the wait in hope for Him who was born in Bethlehem. The promise is that if we wait, we will find Him coming to birth within us, around us, planting seeds of hope in communities where children need help and support. We will find Him coming to birth within ourselves and within our communities, and we will be stronger and braver and gladder and kinder than we ever were before, than we ever could have been if He had not come among us.

The Christ still comes among us

“... to show God’s love aright...
... when half-spent was the night.”¹

Will you wait in hope with me? I hope so!

¹ Anonymous, “Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming,” *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 48.