

a carol of hope

Isaiah 64:1-12

December 3, 2017

(Choir sings: *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*, arr. Dan Forrest)

Did you like that song? Did it pump you up? What is it about that song that gets you excited, that lifts your spirits, that makes an emotional connection with you?

It's the style of the music, isn't it, bright and joyful and full of energy? But it's also the fact that it's familiar. You know the carol. You have sung it many times. And it's Christmas. That familiar carol evokes all the feelings you associate with Christmas, all the feelings we as believers associate with Christmas: God coming to us, entering our space, not leaving us alone to fend for ourselves as best we can, but coming near. God coming near as one of us to help us, to save us, to bring peace to us and to our world.

Hail the heaven-born Prince of peace!

The child is royal born, an emissary from God's kingdom itself, the bearer of God's peace, the bearer of shalom.

Hail the Sun of righteousness!

The image comes from the book of the prophet Malachi, the promise of a day when the bright sun of God's goodness, the bright sun of God's justice, will rise over the earth making all things right.

Light and life to all he brings,

The bright sun brings light, letting us see clearly what is true, what is good, what is beautiful, and not just us, but letting all see. And the bright sun brings life: the joy of eating and drinking and singing and dancing and working and playing and being together, bringing life to us, but not just us, bringing life to all.

Risen with healing in his wings.

This is still from Malachi. The rays of light from the bright sun of God's righteousness rising over the horizon are healing rays, healing the wounds of God's people, healing the nations.

Peace, justice, light, life, healing. The song excites us because it speaks to us of the good news which brings great joy to all the people. The song excites us because it speaks to us of Christmas.

But it's not yet Christmas. The Sun of righteousness has not yet risen. The angels have not yet sung "glory." The light is obscured by gloomy clouds and all of humanity is still enveloped in death's dark shadows. And peace -- where is it? Where is it?

Today we sing a different carol, not loud and strong, but quiet and pleading.

*O come, O come, Emmanuel,
and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here ...*

Here. Where is here? Here is here, of course! We sing the carol, not because it is about there and then, but about here and now. We are Israel mourning in lonely exile. Aren't we?

We are mourning the gloomy clouds of hateful speech and fear of the stranger and anxiety about the future.

We are mourning death's dark shadows casting a pall over Syria and Afghanistan, over Paris and Las Vegas, over Charlottesville.

We are mourning envy and strife and quarrels, nation divided from nation, race divided from race, rich divided from poor, all peoples, not in one heart and mind, but with hearts hardened against each other and minds closed to each other.

We make a home where we are as best we can, just as the people of Israel made a home as best they could in Babylon, but we know this is not our true home. This is not how it is meant to be. This is not how we are meant to be. And so we sing a carol of longing, a carol of pleading, a carol of hope: come, Emmanuel, come.

Today we sing a carol of hope. Hope is born from grief. Where there is no mourning, there is no need for hope. We light a candle, we sing a carol, we cry out to God because we carry the heavy burden of grief in our hearts.

Why don't you tear the sky open and come down? The mountains would see you and shake with fear. They would tremble like water boiling over a hot fire. Come and reveal your power and make the nations tremble. No one has ever seen or heard of a God like you, who does such deeds for those who put their hope in him.

Did God tear open the sky and come down? Has God come to us, tearing open the sky and making the mountains tremble? Hope is born from grief, but hope is not the only child of grief. Despair is also born from grief. And sometimes the line between hope and despair is very fine indeed.

Isaiah voices the cry of God's people in exile, homeless, abandoned, feeling abandoned by God, but knowing it's their own fault, knowing that God feels distant not because God has moved but because they have moved. They are a people on the brink of despair because God has not torn open the sky, yet they dare to hope. They dare to believe that God will listen. They dare to believe that God will come.

Because? What is the line between hope and despair? Trust. It is trust: trust in God, banking on God, believing that God will be God.

You are our father, Lord. You created us. We are your people; [so] be merciful to us.

There is a fine line between hope and despair, but the great gulf, the nearly impassable chasm, is between hope and despair on one side, and apathy on the other. If we do not feel grief, if we cannot feel grief, then our hearts have grown cold indeed, and we are of no use to anybody and no use to God.

And if we cannot feel grief, we will never feel joy. Hope is born from grief, from calling out to God from the midst of our grief and believing that God listens, from imploring God to come here and believing that God will. Hope is born from grief, and joy is born from hope: "Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come!"

Emmanuel shall come, not tearing open the sky, not making the mountains tremble, but as a child humbly born, born as we are, living as we do, dying as we do, coming to us, literally God among us, to bring us home from exile, because where God is is home. When God is with us, we are home.