

## **God has heard your prayer**

Luke 1:5-25

November 27, 2011

*O little town of Bethlehem,  
how still we see thee lie!  
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep  
the silent stars go by;  
Yet in thy dark streets shineth  
the everlasting light;  
The hopes and fears of all the years  
are met in thee tonight.*

I always associate Easter with the dawn, with sunrise, but I associate Christmas with night. Easter comes in spring, at the time of lengthening days and an awakening earth, but Christmas comes in winter, at a time of short days and long nights and an earth in hibernation. Easter is about the dawning of a new day. Christmas is about a light that pierces the darkness.

The light that pierces the darkness is hope.

*Yet in thy dark streets shineth  
the everlasting light;  
The hopes and fears of all the years  
are met in thee tonight ...*

Hopes and fears meet, in Bethlehem, with the coming of the light! The dreams, the longings, the yearnings that have long lain dormant and neglected and forgotten in a seemingly endless night are suddenly roused from their sleep by the light that shines in the darkness.

On the first Sunday of Advent, we light the candle of hope. It is right that we begin Advent, the season of expectation, here, with hope, because it is hope, the light of hope, that shines into the dark places of our lives and opens our eyes to see the new thing that is happening, the new thing God is doing, the new One God is bringing into our lives and into our world. Hope comes first.

What is the opposite of hope? Despair. The opposite of hope is despair.

And what does despair look like? An old lady in a tattered coat picking through a dumpster? An old man sitting alone at the end of the bar nursing his whiskey? A hollow-eyed young woman shooting up? A blank-eyed young man wearing an orange jump suit and sitting in the same chair in the same cell day after day, year after year?

What does despair look like? Can despair look like this?

There is a kind of despair that is quiet and well-disguised and virtually invisible. It's a despair that goes through the motions, even does more than go through the motions, a despair that acts nobly and justly and keeps promises and fulfills duties and wears a smile. It's a despair that can even be called happy, or at least contented, a despair that looks nothing like despair to anyone who looks on, but is still despair, real despair, maybe even the deepest kind of despair.

It is despair because the hopes and dreams that may once have animated your life have long been set aside, because the deepest longings of your heart have been given up. It is despair because you have accepted the fact that what you have prayed for for years will never be, because you know, deep in your soul you know, that things are as they are and will be as they will be. Nature will run its course. Things will end up as they always end up. People won't change. Maybe -- yes, you are beginning to believe it -- people can't change.

That's despair. You can go on doing whatever you do and even do it well. You can go on being a good husband, a good father, a good friend, but hope is dead. That's despair. Sometimes it looks like this ...

Sometimes it looks like Zechariah. Zechariah and Elizabeth were good people, good people! They lived good lives in God's sight. They fully obeyed all the Lord's laws and commands. They did the right things, lived exemplary lives, fulfilled their duties -- to the Lord, to their neighbors, to each other. Zechariah was a priest, a man with a valued heritage and a valued vocation, a vocation, a service, that he faithfully performed.

But they lived in despair.

For Elizabeth, the silence was deafening and the emptiness filled every corner of her body and soul -- the silence of a household without children, the emptiness of a barren womb.

And Zechariah carried a double burden, quietly bearing too the mantle of shame and disgrace that hung on his wife, and even more quietly bearing his own grief at having no child to father, no heir to provide for, no son to carry on the work of his father.

It was despair because they had given up. They knew they were too old! They weren't crying or complaining or trying or even praying anymore. Those days were long gone. They got on with their lives, fulfilled their duties ... and buried their hopes.

And then God came to them! God burst onto the scene! God burst into the dreamless nighttime of their lives. The angel of the Lord came to Zechariah and told him, "God has heard your prayer."

What prayer? His prayer for his wife? His prayer for a child? Maybe. Probably.

But what if Zechariah had stopped praying that prayer long ago? What if he knew they were way too old and it wasn't worth asking anymore? One commentator I read suggested the angel might be referring to Zechariah's prayers as a priest for his people, his prayers for the salvation of Israel!

Because Zechariah and Elizabeth and all the men and women of Israel had long been filled with despair, quiet despair, the despair of decades, of centuries, bearing the shame and disgrace of foreign rule, paying taxes and pledging allegiance to rulers who demanded the kind of fear and trembling and obedience that should only be due to God, the despair of the Lord's silence, of a God who was not there, of a God who did not hear them or come to save them.

It was despair because they no longer expected God to come. It was quiet despair because they got on with their lives, working and raising families and marking the holy days and praying, but no longer hoping.

And then God came to them! God burst onto the scene! God burst into the dreamless nighttime of their lives. The angel of the Lord came to Zechariah and told him, "God has heard your prayer."

What are you praying for?

I'm not talking about the litany of things we pray for every day: for health, for safety, for a sick friend, for an important meeting, for a difficult decision. What are you praying for? What are you longing for? What are you aching for? What are you praying for in the deepest recesses of your soul? What have you been praying for, for years? What is the ache of your heart?

Are you praying, like Zechariah, for a child? Praying to have a child, or praying for a child you already have? Praying for God to guide, to protect, to bring back, to save?

Are you praying, like Zechariah, for a generation of children, for a generation of other people's children, for a generation of all our children and all our children's children, for healing of wounds and mending of wrongs, for filling bellies and filling spirits, for reconciling people divided against each other? Are you praying for peace?

What are you praying for?

God has heard your prayer.

But you don't believe me, do you? I don't know if I believe me! Because we are filled with despair, with a quiet despair. We just call it by other names. We call it resignation, acceptance, being realistic.

Listen! Listen again! God has heard your prayer! God is coming! God is coming to save!

Today, we lit the first candle of Advent, the candle of hope. It is right that we begin here, because as much as things seem normal, as much as our lives appear to be purposeful and engaged, as much as we seem happy, without hope, we will not be able to embrace peace or love or joy.

Despair enervates. Quiet despair leaves us content with less, so much less than the real desires of our hearts. We expend energy but not passion. We wish only for little things, no longer willing or able to expose ourselves to the risk of wanting more. We live, but we don't live.

But hope opens the door. Hope opens our hearts. Hope lets light in, into the dark places of our lives.

Peace is something worth praying for! Peace is something worth working for!

And love. Love is ... possible. Love is real. Love is worth the risk of loving.

And joy. Joy comes when we realize that the Lord is coming! The Lord is coming to us! God has heard our prayer!