

And shared our common lot

Isaiah 40:1-11

December 7, 2008

God is coming!

Clear the way! Prepare a road! Fill every valley! Level every mountain!

Call out the bulldozers and the dump trucks, the graders and the paving rollers. Call out the gravel trucks and the asphalt-laying machines and the engineers with their transits. We have a road to build!

And it must be a magnificent road, the finest of all roads, straight and broad and perfectly level, a road fit for the entrance ... of God!

Line the road with mighty trees and fragrant flowering bushes, and among the trees and bushes set up reviewing stands where all the people may gather to watch. Raise brightly-colored banners and flags from every nation on earth. There must be brass bands and symphony orchestras and choirs of a thousand voices. And fireworks! There must be lots and lots of fireworks!

The road must be ready. And we must be ready! What would you do to get ready for the God who was coming to you? Would you get your house in order? Would you get your life in order? Would you confess your sins and reorder your priorities and refocus your energies and desires so that when God comes, when the glory of the Lord is revealed, you will be ready to gaze on it and welcome it and exult in it?

The road is ready, and the people are ready, watching and waiting, watching and waiting for the glory of the Lord to be revealed, watching and waiting for God to come.

But he doesn't. God doesn't come.

Oh, God does come. God does come as he promised, just not that way, not by that road. God takes another way.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you have come to us, and shared our common lot ...

"And shared our common lot." What an unexpected and astonishing thing to say! Not God bending an ear to hear our cries. Not God stooping low to see our troubles. Not God building a wall around us to protect us from our enemies. Not God lifting us up to raise us out of our miseries. Not God revealing to us a glimpse, even a glimpse, of his glory to bolster our courage. But God ... sharing our common lot.

It's not a usual phrase in creeds or statements of faith, but it is one of my favorite phrases in the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith. Because it is good news! It is good news that God comes to us, that God comes to us in Jesus Christ to be among us, to be with us, to be ... one of us! In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, you have come to us, and shared our common lot.

What is our common lot?

It is my lot to be male, to be a citizen of the United States of America, to be blessed with a wife and three children and three grandchildren with more on the way, to enjoy an adequate income and a comfortable life. But male or female, American or African, married or unmarried, rich or poor -- these describe our particular lot in life, not our common lot.

What is our common lot? It is our common lot to be born and to die, to grow and to learn and to age, to require food and drink and rest -- and companionship -- to survive, to have the capacity to live well amidst a wide variety of conditions and climates and circumstances, and yet to be fragile too, vulnerable to accident and injury and disease, and to the quirks of nature and history.

It is our common lot, as the prophet says, that we are like grass, like wild flowers:

*All human beings are like grass;
they last no longer than wild flowers.
Grass withers and flowers fade
when the Lord sends the wind blowing over them.
People are no more enduring than grass.
Yes, grass withers and flowers fade,
but the word of our God endures forever.*

Now grass and wild flowers have their own certain charm and beauty. They bring delight to the senses. They are, each and every one, each and every species, worthy elements of God's created order, part of what makes it all good ... as we are. And yet their charms and beauties are simple and humble, fragile and fleeting. How quickly they fade. How quickly they die. How short is their time in this life.

And so our charms and beauties are simple, humble, delicate, short-lived. And so we live and grow for our brief moment in the sun where we are planted, drawing from the resources at hand that may nourish us.

It is our common lot to exist in one place, to be able to see and hear and know only what we can see and hear and know from where we stand. There is so much each of us do not know, cannot see. And so it is our common lot to live, if we will live, not always by sight but by faith, by faith invested in something or someone in which we put our ultimate trust.

It is our common lot, not to see God, but to spy glimpses of God's image reflected in the world or in people's spirits, not to hear God, but to catch whispers of God's voice in words spoken by prophets or even by the wind.

It is our common lot to take our lives as they are, as they are given to us, and make of them what we will, make of them, perhaps, by God's grace, and in obedience to God's will, something beautiful and good and pleasing to God.

This is our common lot, and this is the lot Jesus shared with us. He had a certain charm and beauty about him, but simple and humble, like any of us. Like any of us, he ate and drank and slept, laughed and cried and prayed, grew and learned and aged. Like any of us, he knew pain and hurt, rejection and betrayal, temptation and doubt. Like any of us, Jesus, the man of Nazareth, had to make something of the life he was given, by faith, in trust, through obedience to the will of God.

And like any of us ... he died. It is our common lot to die, and in Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, you, God, have come to us and shared our common lot!

Impossible! Impossible! God cannot know hunger and thirst, pain and desire, doubt and obedience. And God cannot die!

No, God cannot die, and God does not die. And yet, at the heart of our faith is this mystery: in Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you have come to us and shared our common lot!

We cannot resolve the mystery, but we must embrace it, because without it, the gospel is not the same. If Jesus is not a man of Nazareth, then God may have come to us but has not in any way shared our common lot, and we may rightly despair that our way is a lonely way, a way God cannot possibly understand. And if Jesus is not God, then he certainly has shared our common lot, but God has not yet come to us, and we are still waiting, still waiting for the One who will save us, still far, so far, from the God we long to know.

But when we embrace the mystery, we are embraced by this good news: that in Jesus Christ, God has come to us and shared our common lot.

It means that God understands our way and that we do not walk it alone!

It means that God is close, as close to us as any one of us is to another, as we talk and touch and experience the presence of another soul.

It means that the beauty and value of this life, of one single human life, is affirmed and validated, because God -- God! -- choose to share it.

And, above all, it means this: it can be done! There is a way!

There is a way from life as it is to life that is eternal. There is a way to make of this life, as it is given to us, something wholly pleasing to God. Someone -- one of us! -- has found the way and followed it to the end and invites us to follow!

It is not an easy way, but it is a way that leads to joy and a way that is joy-filled all along the way, and the One who has gone before us, the One who has shared our common lot, the One in whom God has come to us, the One in whom God is with us, goes with us all the way!