

**By the Tender Mercy of Our God**  
**Luke 1:57-60, 67-79**  
**Advent 2/Service of Hope & Remembrance**

<sup>57</sup>Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son.

<sup>58</sup>Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. <sup>59</sup>On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. <sup>60</sup>But his mother said, “No; he is to be called John.”

<sup>67</sup>Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

<sup>68</sup>“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,  
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.  
<sup>69</sup>He has raised up a mighty savior for us  
in the house of his servant David,  
<sup>70</sup>as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,  
<sup>71</sup>that we would be saved from our enemies  
and from the hand of all who hate us.  
<sup>72</sup>Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,  
and has remembered his holy covenant,  
<sup>73</sup>the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,  
to grant us <sup>74</sup>that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,  
might serve him without fear,  
<sup>75</sup>in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

<sup>76</sup>And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,  
<sup>77</sup>to give knowledge of salvation to his people  
by the forgiveness of their sins.

<sup>78</sup>By the tender mercy of our God,  
the dawn from on high will break upon us,  
<sup>79</sup>to give light to those who sit  
in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet  
into the way of peace.”

## The Sermon

If you could be given anything at all this Christmas, but only that one thing, what would it be?

What is your dream image of an ideal Christmastime scene?

What does a Christmastime street look like? What does it sound like?

From the front lawn, or just outside the front door, what does an ideal Christmastime house look like?

What about inside of an ideal Christmas home; what do its interior places look like—

inside the welcoming front entrance,  
the room where the tree or decorations are prominent,  
the Christmas dining table,  
the aromatic kitchen,  
the glowing hearth?

What does it sound like in that house—Cheerful relatives? Chatting neighbors? Bing Crosby? (I mean the old Bing Crosby records, but maybe Bing Crosby in your living room is part of your ideal Christmas.)

If any of those scenes bring you even a momentary sense of warmth, of solace, of a sense of expectation that Jesus is coming, I commend them to you.

In this cold season—whatever that may mean to you—I wish you all the genuine warmth you can get, even if it's only in your imagination.

Maybe it was a brave imagination that the New Testament figure Zechariah had, which the Holy Spirit was able to access in order to give him the words to proclaim the prophecy of blessing at the birth of his son, John—later to be called John the Baptist.

It may have been brave imagination, or, in the words of the late Luke scholar François Bovon, Zechariah was “conditioned by the fullness of the Holy Spirit [to] speak prophetically,” which is the level of submission that would have been required since, “according to Luke, the religion of Israel, bound to history and the word of God, was as good as blocked off at that time.”

In other words, based on the evidence, when John the Baptist was born, there was no particular reason to believe that the “dayspring” from on high was about to break upon the people of God. At that time, it felt, to many people, like both history and religion had led them to a dead end—

which is illustrated by Zechariah and Elizabeth themselves: both descended from priestly lineage, they were also, as Luke puts it politely, “getting on in years.” And the cruel word they used for her condition, in regard to child bearing, was the word “barren,” like an empty landscape where nothing can grow.

Aging but still faithful; past the age of being able or expected to bring new life into the world—that could describe the situation of the people of God, or the state of their religious life, as well as it could describe Elizabeth and Zechariah.

In other words, the developments that were about to take place were beyond unlikely.

And in the fullness of time, Elizabeth bore a son, and they named him John.

And Zechariah, the priest, Elizabeth’s husband, the father of John the Baptist, having been made mute when he questioned the truth of the angel who had delivered the strange news to him that he and Elizabeth would have a baby, was suddenly able to speak again, and the first words he uttered were:

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,  
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them...”

“And you, child,” he said to his infant son,  
“You will be called the prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,  
to give knowledge of salvation to his people  
by the forgiveness of their sins.”

And then he said,

“By the tender mercy of our God—”  
Our expression would be, “from the heart of compassion;”  
I’m embarrassed to say the Greek is, literally, from the *bowels of kindness*—  
from deep within God’s viscera—

this is an astonishing use of anthropomorphism, speaking of God in terms that humans can relate to—

By the deeply felt—one would have to say *physically* felt—compassion that God has for God’s people—

“By the tender mercy of our God,  
the dawn from on high will break upon us,  
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

This is the love of a God who is not distant and enveloped in shadow, but a God who is present right now and knows everything that you are going through.

Christmastime is, for some people, complicated.

Those sentimental songs like “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” and “Chestnuts roasting on an open fire...” (“The Christmas Song”) do an excellent job, in my view, of encapsulating the melancholy that many people feel at this time of year.

For some, Christmas always meant someone was going to be getting deep into the liquor cabinet, with all kinds of predictably catastrophic repercussions; or the wrong two people were going to be forced to sit in a room together and pretend for the family’s sake that it wasn’t a disaster waiting to happen.

For some, each December is a reminder that for them, Christmas can never be the same again, as loved ones are no longer here, or living arrangements have changed irrevocably.

And for others, it’s just a matter of the melancholy of an aching dissatisfaction—the sugar plums don’t dance in their heads; the chestnuts don’t roast on an open fire; there’s nobody to imagine taking on a sleigh ride.

For many of us, Advent is a deep and rewarding spiritual pilgrimage and Christmastime is full of beauty and wonder. For others, it’s complicated.

“Some of us walk into Advent,” write Ann Weems,  
“tethered to our unresolved yesterdays,  
the pain still stabbing; the hurt still throbbing.  
It’s not that we don’t know better;

it's just that we can't stand up anymore by ourselves.  
On the way to Bethlehem,  
will you give us a hand?"

That is from her spiritual masterpiece called *Kneeling in Bethlehem*.

Elsewhere, she collected her prayers reflecting the lifelong, daily anguish that she endures, having lost a son on his 21st birthday. With the voice of a bereaved mother, she begs God:

“Turn back to me; you promised.  
Be merciful to me; you promised.  
Heal me; you promised.  
My heart is broken.  
My mind is broken.  
My body is broken.  
Nothing works anymore.  
Unless you help me nothing will ever work again.”

Our humanity, our mortal flesh, is the vessel of this life, and it is so frail. It's true for everyone; it's part of being human.

What does your ideal Christmas feel like?

And how close or far is that ideal from your reality?

No distant or merely philosophical God could be any match for the expectations we place on ourselves and in our lives for the *ideal* self, the *ideal* life, the *ideal* Christmas, none of which we can ever reach.

And: that idealized Christmas makes no difference anyway, if it is only window dressing on a barren world—an annual Band-Aid placed loosely over deep wounds that we can never heal on our own.

The good news of Jesus Christ is that God is not nearly that distant, or that irrelevant.

Our God is paying close attention.

Our God is wounded by our addiction to violence, and our refusal to seek life-affirming solutions of reconciliation when it seems so much more satisfying to inflict pain and death in retaliation.

The God who gave us life and brought us into the world has not just a theoretical, but a *visceral* compassion for us;

deep in God's own being there is a passion—dare we say, a need—to embrace us, to shower light on our darkness, to save us;

to call disciples to follow Jesus into the world,

“to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners;  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor” (Isaiah 61:1-2).

We have a message to carry into the world:

That this is not, and never was, all there is—

that all of this life,  
with its joy and its disappointment,  
with its triumphs and its heartaches,  
takes place within the framework of an eternal God  
whose arms encompass all of creation,  
all of our lives,  
all of our loved ones,  
all of our pain, and sorrow, and worry.

God is deeper than our deepest sadness,  
wider and more present than our deepest isolation,  
present even in the cavernous emptiness inside  
when a part of our lives and our souls is taken away from us.

Harold Kushner wrote a prayer some years ago called *A Prayer for the World*:

Let the rain come and wash away the ancient grudges,  
the bitter hatreds held and nurtured over generations.

Let the rain wash away the memory of the hurt, the neglect.  
Then let the sun come out and fill the sky with rainbows.  
Let the warmth of the sun heal us wherever we are broken.  
    Let it burn away the fog so that we can see each other clearly.  
    So that we can see beyond labels, beyond accents, gender or skin color.  
Let the warmth and brightness of the sun melt our selfishness.  
    So that we can share the joys and feel the sorrows of our neighbors.  
And let the light of the sun be so strong  
    that we will see all people as our neighbors.  
Let the earth, nourished by rain, bring forth flowers to surround us with beauty.  
And let the mountains teach our hearts to reach upward to heaven.

In the Church of Scotland there is a prayer for Christmas Day:

Today, O God,  
the soles of your feet  
have touched the earth.  
Today,  
the back street, the forgotten place  
have been lit up with significance.  
Today,  
the households of earth  
welcome the King of heaven.  
For you have come among us,  
you are one of us.  
So may our songs rise to surround your throne  
as our knees bend to salute your cradle.  
Amen.

“And ye, beneath life’s crushing load,  
Whose forms are bending low,  
Who toil along the climbing way  
With painful steps and slow,  
Look now! for glad and golden hours  
Come swiftly on the wing:  
O rest beside the weary road,  
And hear the angels sing.”

If you could be given anything at all this Christmas, what would it be?

## Prayers of Hope and Remembrance

*The minister will offer short prayers,  
Allowing time for you to lift up your specific prayers silently to God.  
When the minister prays, "By the tender mercy of our God,"  
all will say together, "The dawn from on high will break upon us."*

O God,  
You know already that we sometimes find ourselves  
lonely in the midst of a crowd,  
melancholy in the midst of celebrations,  
anxious in the face of challenges  
and sometimes hiding tears behind a smile.  
Help us to believe your eternal promise, that  
By the tender mercy of our God,  
**The dawn from on high will break upon us.**

Help us to recognize the Truth in us, O God,  
Not to disguise our pain but to reach out for joy,  
Not to live in denial but to live in hope,  
Not to forget or blur our memories,  
but to hold sacred the people, places and things  
that you have made sacred to us.  
By the tender mercy of our God,  
**The dawn from on high will break upon us.**

Hear us now as, in hope and remembrance, we lift up in silent prayer:  
Those who are suffering...  
Those who mourn the absence of loved ones, particularly now, during the  
holidays...  
Those whose anger and frustration eats away at them from the inside...  
Those with unresolved family or relationship issues...  
Those whom Christmas Eve will find alone...  
Those who cannot afford to "do Christmas" the way they long to...  
Those whose grief has not yet grown to acceptance...  
Those particular people whose pains are known only to us...  
And finally, we pray for ourselves, and the pains known only to you...  
By the tender mercy of our God,  
**The dawn from on high will break upon us.**

Loving God,  
You sent your son to heal the sick in heart, body, mind and spirit.  
Everywhere he went, he brought healing, and hope, and new life.

Grant us your peace,  
Lighten our pathways with hope,  
Open our eyes and ears, our minds and hearts with joy,  
And bathe us, and renew us, and surround us, with your holy and everlasting love.  
By the tender mercy of our God,  
**The dawn from on high will break upon us.**

Amen.

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