

## FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT Everlasting Joy

[Isaiah 35:1-10](#); [Psalm 146:5-10](#)

Candlelight Christmas Worship

Dr. Douglas A. Learned

Sunday, December 19, 2010

Chapel at 8, Sanctuary at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

In this chilly time of year I often think of the writings of Kathleen Norris, a Presbyterian writer who, for a number of years lived in Lemon, South Dakota. During that time she wrote reflections on prayer, in the sometimes harsh environment of the cold plains that surrounded her. One winter day, she penned these lines:

“I walk downtown, wearing a good many of the clothes I own, keeping my head down and breathing through several thicknesses of a wool scarf. A day so cold it hurts to breathe; dry enough to freeze spit. Kids crack it on the sidewalk.

Walking with care, snow barely covering the patches of ice, I begin to recall a canticle or a psalm—I can’t remember which—and my body keeps time:

Cold and chill, bless the Lord

Dew and rain, bless the Lord

Frost and chill, bless the Lord

Ice and snow, bless the Lord

Nights and days, bless the Lord

Light and darkness, bless the Lord

“Another line comes to mind,” she writes, “‘at the breath of God’s mouth the waters flow.’ Spring seems far off, impossible, but it is coming. Already there is dusk instead of darkness at five in the afternoon; already hope is stirring at the edges of the day.”

We need such poetry, prayer, and song to express our hope and faith, in these days of winter solstice, lunar eclipse, and the Advent of Christ.

I like that Norris’ words mirror how Scripture itself, in places such as Isaiah 35, expresses a vision of hope from a place of cold darkness, in the language of creation—the beasts of the fields, plants and flowers, cycles of light and darkness which result from the turning of great spheres in space around the sun. Her meditation reminds me as well of Paul’s words in Romans 8, *We know the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now...Now hope that is seen is not hope...But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.*

On Christmas Eve we will read from the Gospel of Luke the narrative of Jesus’ birth which tells the story of a turn from incredible despair to great hope, given us in a child. With his birth we are promised that mercy will be shown to those who turn to God. The powerful will come down from their thrones, the humble will be lifted up, and the hungry will be fed with good things. God will remember his mercy for his people. Jesus’ mother says all that in the very first chapter of Luke.

Such a turn to blessings is abundantly clear in Isaiah as well. We see that as we move from Isaiah 34,

which pronounces a terrible judgment on Edom for standing against God and his people when foreign powers threatened. Isaiah 34 and 35 are really a pair, judgment in chapter 34 and hope in chapter 35.

Chapter 34, verse two reads, *For the LORD is enraged against all the nations, and furious against all their hoards; he has doomed them, and given them over to slaughter.* Here is poetic imagery of terrible trouble for Edom; the earth is scorched, and all becomes like an infertile desert. Verse nine says, *And the streams of Edom shall be turned to pitch, and her soil into sulfur; her land shall become burning pitch.* Verse eleven and following unfold images of a land filled with terrible animals like hawks and hedgehogs, troublesome plants like nettles and thistles, jackals and ostriches, owls and buzzards. You may appreciate some of those plants or animals, but Isaiah is drawing poetic contrast here. The land of Edom shall be made dry and threatening for the people, who must now live in fear because of their opposition to the Lord.

Then Chapter 35 depicts an entirely different picture, a turn to hope.

Verse one says, *The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom...then, They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God.* There are beautiful images about weak hands, feeble knees, and a fearful heart. [The Lord will] *Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do no fear!* One way to translate that phrase, "fearful heart" is racing heart, conjuring the notion of an animal chased by a predator, or like our own hearts filled the anxieties of the day, whatever they may be. God will now calm that racing heart with assurance that you need not fear.

*A highway shall be there,* reads verse eight, *and it shall be called the Holy Way.* Verse nine adds, *No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come upon it...but the redeemed shall walk there.* I would add that they will walk with assurance. These are words of hope that we recite this time of year, familiar as they may be, not just for ourselves, but for each other. Because this is a season in which we not only receive God's vision of a better day, but also grant that vision to others through our own prayers and through our acts of mercy to those with weak hands, feeble knees, and fearful hearts. What do the angels say to the shepherds? *Do not be afraid! I bring you good news of a great joy for all the people.*

Regarding the turning of seasons and spheres in space, as all creation reflects the hope we have in God's grace, I recently finished a remarkable biography titled *Galileo's Daughter*. The book is about the great Florentine scientist and mathematician, who promoted the Copernican notion that the earth orbits the sun and discovered the moons of Jupiter, which appears as a bright star in the southern sky this time of year. The book is also about his relationship with his daughter, Maria, who lived as a nun in a cloistered Franciscan convent. Much of the text of the book is composed of her correspondence to her father through the heights and depths of his academic career, and though his terrible trial of inquisition under Pope Urban VIII. He suffered greatly under this trial in the illnesses of his old age. Ironically, and sadly, as part of his punishment, Galileo was charged to recite the seven penitential psalms repeatedly for a number of years.

Maria writes to her father, soon after,

"I would surely not want you to doubt my devotion, for at no time do I ever leave off commending you with all my soul to blessed God, because you fill my heart, Sire, and nothing matters more to me than your spiritual and physical well-being. And to give you some tangible proof of this concern, I tell you that I succeeded in obtaining permission to view your sentence, the reading of which, though on the one hand it grieved me wretchedly, on the other hand it thrilled me to have seen it and found in it a means of being able to do you good, Sire, in some very small way...that is by taking upon myself the obligation you have to recite one time each week the seven psalms...Therefore had I been able to substitute myself in the rest of your punishment, most willingly would I elect a prison even straiter than this one in which I dwell, if by doing so I could set you at liberty."

The cruel irony is that the poetry of scripture, the psalms themselves, would be levied upon this man as punishment, yet there is a very tender beauty that his daughter would lift this cruelty from him, and free her father from one aspect of his humiliation. This humble, powerless nun redeems this holy poetry from

wrong use by misguided but powerful church leaders (without rebellion against them, but with holy reversal) transforming God's word from a source of burden to a fount of blessings. In taking the prayer of these penitential readings upon herself, she not only reflects the sacrificial mercy of Christ to her father in a time when his hands were frail, his knees weak, his heart troubled, but she quietly reforms their use to their God-given purpose, which was, as with the whole of Scripture, to redeem the lost, by grace.

We do not live our faith in isolation, but in the company of sinners God is turning to saints. So when you or I forget, in our own dark hour, someone else will remember for us, and will recite the words we do not have strength to recite ourselves, and pray the words of hope that we cannot summon ourselves, because we are a part of a community of faith that holds one another up before God, when we cannot stand ourselves. So, when we cannot stand, we stand.

Yes, these are words of individual assurance. We rejoice in the personal, individual salvation we have in Christ Jesus. Yet, this is a season for collective, corporate remembrance of God's faithful deliverance to the poor in spirit, the cursed, the lost. This is the season in which we need to recite the poetry of the prophets, the witness of the Gospels, the truth of the incarnation, not only for ourselves, but for each other. Your mission in this season is that you not only receive this gift of assurance, but grant it to another.

Charles Spurgeon wrote in one of his sermons on Isaiah 35,

"If we have a lion-like spirit, let us not imitate the king of beasts in his cruelty to those timid fallow deer that fly before him, but let us place out strength at their service for their help and protection. Let us with downy fingers bind up the wounded heart; with oil and wine let us nourish their fainting spirits. In this battle of life, let the unwounded warriors bear their injured comrades to the rear, bathe their wounds, and cover them from the storm of war. Be gentle with those that are desponding."

Each one of us in this life reaches points when we are lost to fear and humiliation in the face of powers that appear to have victory. In such moments we are called to minister one another, and to recite and recall for one another that God is coming, and that *...the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to God, with singing*. An everlasting joy shall be upon us and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. So if you feel you have no voice...sing! Even if you can't hit pitch, the sound of your praise and thanksgiving for redemption is glorious to God's ears and resounds as mercy throughout creation!

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.