

A NEW & GLORIOUS MORN

A Thrill of Hope (Part 1) | Luke 1:5-25; 57-80

The year was 1843 and, as the Advent season approached, a parish priest in the French village of Roquemaure had a problem. It had been a challenging year, to say the least. France had gone to war with Algeria. The European economy had been in tumult. Disease and illness had taken the lives of many in that parish. It was a time not so unlike the times through which you and I are living today. But, for that little congregation, there'd been a recent bright spot. A renovation of the church's beloved pipe organ had been completed. The problem was, how to celebrate this?

And, then, the priest hit on an idea. He approached a local lawyer named, Placide Cappeau. "Placide, would you consider writing a Christmas poem we might recite at the re-dedication of the organ?" Cappeau was no stranger to sudden challenges or difficult times himself. When he was just eight years old, his best friend had accidentally shot him. The injury required the amputation of Placide's right hand. It utterly destroyed his plan of one-day taking over his father's barrel-making business. His friend's family was devastated too. Racked over how he'd wrecked Cappeau's life, they put up the money needed so that Placide could go to school and then to college instead. And in the midst of the darkness, an unexpected light began to dawn.

It turns out that Placide Cappeau had a gift for putting sublime wisdom into simple words.¹ Shortly before Christmas 1843, he presented his poem to his priest. Soon thereafter, the poem was set to music by Adolphe Adam, a rising composer. In 1847, the opera singer, Emily Laurey, premiered the combined piece in the town of Roquemaure and the song broke like the dawn from the darkness of that time. Since then, the song has been sung by Mariah Carey, Celine Dion, Andrea Bocelli, and innumerable other artists, including soloists here at Christ Church every Christmas Eve. This is how Placide Cappeau began his famous poem...

*O holy night, the stars are brightly shining
It is the night of the dear Saviour's birth.
Long lay the world in sin and error pining
Till He appeared and the Spirit felt its worth.
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.
Fall on your knees, oh, hear the angel voices
O night divine, the night when Christ was born.*

Our preaching team entitled our Christmas series this year, "**A THRILL OF HOPE,**" because we believe our weary world is still seeking a reason to rejoice – maybe even more today than when those words first flowed from Cappeau's pen. So, each week of this series, we're going to borrow a phrase from this famous Christmas carol to express

one of the reasons the Bible gives us for HOPE right now. It's no longer 1843 and almost 2023, but war and economic tumult, tragic violence and loss, disease and darkness of many kinds still lay heavy upon many hearts. And one of the most important messages of Christmas, to quote Cappeau, is that we CAN live with hope, ***For Yonder Breaks a New & Glorious Morn.***

I can only imagine how many of YOU need that encouragement right now. I know that was certainly true for the family we read about in Luke chapter 1. So that you understand the context for their story, it helps to know that about three millennia ago, God commissioned one of the twelve tribes of Israel – the tribe of Levi, in particular – to a special role within the life of his people.² The Levites were ordained as the stewards of the religious life of the nation. They were the work force that provided for the worship services, community care, and system of justice that kept the spirituality of Israel alive from generation to generation. We would say that they were sort of like the church staff. Within the tribe of Levi, however, one family was given an even more specialized role. God commissioned the household of Moses' brother Aaron to serve as the priesthood of Israel. They were like the pastors on the church staff.

So, with that background, Luke 1:5 says... **⁵ In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. ⁶ Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly.** In other words, there's this couple. He's a pastor and she's from a pastor's family and they are exceptional people. God looks at both of them and says, in effect, you are living a beautiful and blameless life.

⁷ But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive... Now this had to be hugely confusing to Zech and Liz because, to the Jewish people of that time, having CHILDREN – and, preferably, lots of them was the natural plan. In an era before social media, it was your kids who increased the fame of your name. They were the workforce that got household tasks done and helped you pay the bills. Other than the charity of the Temple, kids were the only old-age social security system in existence at that time. Furthermore, having multiple children was regarded by most people as a sign that God really approved of you. Listen to the words of the Psalmist: **Children are a heritage from the Lord, offspring a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are children born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them (Psa 127:3-5).**

But for Zech and Liz, the quiver was empty **⁷ and they were both very old.** In other words, the morning of opportunity was gone. The afternoon of possibility had passed. The early evening of improbable blessing had slipped away. The deep night of impossible hope had overtaken them. Some of US are in a dark night like that right now. It may have nothing to do with child-bearing. Maybe you have an unrequited longing for love... or for the renewal of a relationship that's gone sour. Perhaps you've

yearned for the return of a son or daughter... or for a renaissance in your vocational life. You may have been praying for the healing of your body... or for deeper peace within your soul. You've waited so long for it, but that GRACE hasn't come.

The story of Elizabeth and Zechariah teach us, however, that life is not a this-for-that arrangement. You can be doing most things well or even everything good (as that couple was) and still suffer things that are so bad. Think about this: God was never more in love with, never more present to, never more at work through the life of his son, Jesus, than at the Cross; yet even he felt forsaken. God loved Elizabeth and Zechariah too. God never left them. There's every reason to think that he ached with this couple over their decades of very real loss. Yet it is very probable that they felt forsaken too.

But in the midst of their dark night, God was planning ***A New & Glorious Morn***. He saw a bigger picture than Zech and Liz could see. He had a more sophisticated plan than their thoughtful schedule. God saw the redemptive thing that he was going to do. There's a lesson in this, too. As Aaron Foster recently reminded me: God wants us to trust Him not because of our circumstances, but because of His character. And we see that character expressed in the remainder of this Bible story.

Verse 8 reads: **⁸ Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, ⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense... ¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³ But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him "JOHN."** Which literally means, "graced by God."

It is worth pausing here and paying close attention to how the angel goes on to describe the FORMS OF GRACE that God is bringing to this couple after so many years of suffering life's GRAVE disappointments. First, the angel says, for all of your previous suffering, you are going to finally experience personal pleasure. **¹⁴ He will be a joy and delight to you...** This kid is going to make you smile and laugh and feel proud – every parent's wish. Secondly, for all of your previous isolation, you will finally experience communal joy **and many will rejoice because of his birth.** In other words, you'll be part of a whole community of love and joy, greater than you could experience on your own. Then, the angel goes on to define the greatest grace about this baby. You are going to experience Godly fulfillment **¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.** That, I suppose, should be every parent's fondest prayers for their child, if they have one – that our kids are not just admired and enjoyed by us or by the people around them, but by God above all. I pray that for my own children.

As I think about these FORMS OF GRACE expressed in God's promise to Elizabeth and Zechariah, I'm struck by what a poetic parallel they present to God's promise for all of us. From the Garden of Eden in Genesis, to the Lord's Table in the Gospels, to the New Creation at the end of Revelation – the scriptures describe God's desire to give all these sorts of graces to his people. The Kingdom of God or of Heaven, as Jesus describes it, is a dimension where you and I experience personal pleasure, communal joy, and the fulfillment of God's good plans at a level that will redeem and overwrite all the suffering and loss that have preceded it.

As followers of Jesus, we have HOPE because we believe that no matter how dark the night of this world gets, we are always moving toward that place out YONDER where, as the poet said, there breaks that new and glorious morn. The mysterious thing is the "YONDER" part. If I can use the image of basking in the presence of a delightful child as a poetic pointer toward the pleasure, joy and fulfillment God ultimately has in mind for us in ALL the unresolved areas of our lives, then maybe some of the life situations I've seen over the years can be helpful analogies to the condition of waiting to be "Graced by God" that you may be experiencing.

The very first couple I married confided in my that they wanted multiple children out YONDER. They had no idea, however, how close that YONDER was. They got pregnant on their honeymoon, had four kids, one of whom now serves on the staff of this church. Another couple I know went through years of in vitro fertilization efforts to no avail, finally gave up, and then the morning surprisingly came, as they got pregnant without medical intervention. I know of more than one couple who were not able to sustain a pregnancy and then YONDER broke the morning in the form of a sudden opportunity to adopt children who so needed loving parents. I have a friend in another state who never had biological children, but she has been God's agent in bringing new mornings of hope to countless children in orphanages around the world. My own sister and numerous families in this church have said a heartsick goodbye to beloved children in this life. But those kids are not lost. They wait to waiting to meet their families, when they wake to a new and glorious morn of the resurrection to eternal life.

We don't get to schedule the coming of God's redeeming grace; but it is always moving closer to us. As my colleague, Bob Geelhoed, often said as he was battling cancer, *"I know that God will heal me in this life or the next. I know that a great good is coming."*

I got a Christmas letter this week from a young mother whose wedding I was honored to perform and whose father, a trustee of this church, went to heaven in March of 2021. She described visiting her father's burial site a month or so ago on what would have been his 75th birthday. *"I placed flowers on his grave and [then] did what I typically do when I visit, stroll around the graveyard and calculate the ages of the souls underneath the headstones that I pass. At first it seems unfair that my Dad had to leave us at 73. Then I stop at the resting place of a boy who was 20, a girl who was 16,*

another just turned 12, a 6-year-old child, a 2-year-old, a 1-month-old, and finally the somber ground of a baby who passed the same day his life began.

"While there are also the graves of those who lived well into their 90's, I am humbled thinking of the families who have suffered tragedy to lose children so young, I recognize that I am fortunate for all the years with my family, past and present... It's with this acknowledgement that I detach somewhat from the daily battle of life for this moment in time... I am reminded that the good and the bad don't refute one another; they coexist within our lives. We wrestle with the challenges and struggles, while still finding joy."

And, I would add, we CAN do that. Though it is often hard to wait, we have reason for HOPE, because a great good – a new and glorious morn – the birth of God's redeeming grace promised in the first and final coming of Christ is always moving toward us.

¹⁸ Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." ¹⁹ The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news.

Please pray with me...

Great God, give us the courage and patience we need to await the personal pleasure, the communal joy, the beautiful fulfillment of all your good purposes. Whether that YONDER is today, or tomorrow or somewhere beyond, we put our trust in your character and plan, because of Jesus our Lord. Amen.

¹ Collins, Ace. *Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001. pp.132–138.

² See Numbers 18.