

"Not Forsaken"

Isaiah 62: 6-12; Titus 3: 4-7; Luke 2: 1, 4-19

While we were leaving last Christmas Eve one of the ushers expressed concern that a young woman had been walking in the front entryway weeping during the service. Did I know who she was?

I didn't. Everyone who filed out the front of the church and exchanged "Merry Christmas!"es had seemed okay. But later it came to me.

There was a man here last Christmas Eve, who came with the woman who still was his wife, but the marriage was coming apart. He had endured several kinds of cancer for years, but the cancer he had then was his last. He was too sick a man for someone not to take care of, and the wife already had decided to move him into an apartment out of state, not far from where she was beginning her new life, so as not to abandon him entirely. They had lived in this community a short time, and knew few people. Their daughter had graduated from college and moved out of town.

But the three of them were here together Christmas Eve. The daughter was the young woman in tears, who paced the front hallway in anguish while the congregation focused on things up front. After the singing of Silent Night and the candles and the lights coming back up, when people file out, she came out, too, right on the heels of her parents, the mother bracing the father, he gaunt and weak, but walking, shaking hands, wishing a Merry Christmas in the midst of it all. Within a couple of weeks he was moved out of town, and he died a couple of weeks later.

He was in a brand new apartment when his last crisis came, and arrangements already had been made to send his body back to the western part of the state which was his home. There was no saying good-byes here, no service, no last time together in church with other mourners. His life was uprooted the final couple of years, and he died uprooted, at last finding some peace and his place in going home to be buried.

Any daughter would be wrought up with that hanging over her head. All of us, however, are especially vulnerable at Christmas. Of all holidays this most connects with us from our childhoods, and its wonder and its wistfulness adhere to the most tender parts of who we are. Most of us are kids again this time of year, not just in entering the spirit of the season, and looking forward to its treats and times together, but in sheltering in its confidence, and harboring in its hope. We are little, always, but most of the year we make our way by making ourselves be big, and doing what we have to, and bearing what we must, but Christmas permits us to be buoyed for a bit by a truce with the troubles and travails of the world. In its familiar embrace we are reminded of seasons, and for the older among us, generations of gestures of good will.

Families come apart. People betray each other. Illness lays siege to calm, to comfort, to dignity, to life. That was like the experience of the Israel to which Isaiah prophesied to offer hope. It had been besieged, defeated, forced out of its own place, forsaken, for all appearances, by the God Who was supposed to take care of it. But God had not forgotten. The promise Isaiah announced, the one the first Christians understood to point to Christmas, concludes: "you shall be called 'Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken.'"

"You shall be called Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken." That's the contrast with our condition which Christmas comes to deliver. Sought Out, not forgotten, not lost, not the person weeping anonymously on the margin of a crowd, not the soul which has to get alone for a few minutes because the place where comfort and courage should be has crumbled. Sending a Savior is not about one-upping affluence and ease, as though truth and purpose and eternal life come to the world to crown our lives of achievement and establishment and indulgence, to make us even richer, a God With Us thrown in with all the other goods we enjoy. No, the prophet speaks for a God who knows that we not only are disappointed, and discouraged, and dislocated, but destroyed. Relationship and sustenance and comfort are what we need, and God is bringing it, "See, your salvation comes."

Bethlehem's birth comes to parents who are dislocated, imposed upon by forces beyond their control. The threat from Herod uproots the baby when barely a boy. The shepherds who are privileged to be witnesses, the wise men from other lands, remain, despite the wonder of the night, and the promises of heaven, prone to the ills and indignities of life; they are mortal, those they love are mortal, shining hours pass and time takes everyone on. Christmas is not some River Styx into which they are dipped, like Achilles, to be rendered invulnerable. Christmas is a baptism into the companionship and the cause of a Lord and leader the prophet foresees as "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief," a harmless, hopeful soul whose dutifulness to God will endure betrayal and abandonment and death. Only then will God's rescuing love reveal its greatest power, and generations of believers have trusted that beyond the vagaries of earthly life lives a Lord who knows the pain of being a person, who has shown us how to live with that in ways pleasing to God, and who cares for us while we live and after we die.

Sometimes Christmas seems a glorious story to which to turn aside from the real world, as though we were pretending about its peace and promise. But it is not so. It is the world of whim and willfulness, discontent and disease, selfishness and cynicism which is full of pretence and falsehood. Christmas is what is true, in a world in which people are not always able to be true. God's love and companionship are what is real, in a world in which our mortal means fail. The God Who loves us and secures us is not far. In this world which knows loneliness and loss, frailty and fear, Christmas reminds us that there is more to us than we know. We are not abandoned or forsaken, but Sought Out, by the God who comes to us in Christ, the rescuer and redeemer Who is God With Us.

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