

Dawn
Second Sunday of Advent
December 6, 2015
Jill R. Russell

Texts: Malachi 3.1-4;
Luke 1.68-79;
Philippians 1.3-11;
Luke 3.1-6

Can you imagine what it was like for the Jewish prisoners in WWII when they first realized that the soldiers storming their concentration camps were Allied troops coming to liberate them? I wonder if they wept or stood frozen in disbelief that the end was finally here. Or think back to that night when the election results came in on November 4, 2008. It doesn't matter who you voted for that day or how you assess the success or failure of this particular presidency. Just the fact that on that night an African American was elected to the highest office of this nation people recognized across political divides that this was one of our moments as a nation given our history when the dawn from on high was breaking upon us. I went back and looked at the pictures from that night particularly of African Americans who were celebrating that night. There was this mix of tears and disbelief and unbridled joy.

This is the emotional field of Luke chapter 1 and the song of Zechariah. The joy that Zechariah expresses in this song goes deeper than the personal joy of a child born in their later years. This joy was grounded in his conviction that the ancient promise of God hadn't been forgotten but was being fulfilled and his child had a part to play in that fulfillment. I'm glad the choir shared this scripture with us because this is the kind of joy that has to be sung to be fully embodied. For people who had been living under occupation and without freedom who had gone centuries without a prophetic word they must have been wondering whether God had forgotten them. But now in this child, in John, the ancient promise was being evoked again.

Zechariah is quite clear about who the actor in this fulfillment would be. The Lord God of Israel had looked on them with favor, redeemed them, raised up a mighty savior who would save them from their enemies. And

this child, his son John, would be the next prophet of the Most High who would go before the Lord, to prepare the way, to give knowledge of this salvation to the people. God is the one who made the promise and is the one who will fulfill it. This is God's work.

This IS God's work, but it is not magical or instantaneous. The fulfillment does not come apart from human engagement or involvement. Think back with me to those tears of relief that I named at the beginning of the sermon. Those tears point to the injustice that is being relieved. That whole history of anti-Semitism, and fierce nationalism – the whole context of WWII – all of that pain and horror is present in those tears of relief on the day of their liberation. The same is true on that election night in 2008. The tears of relief and disbelief are tied to the whole history of slavery, and segregation, and the legacy of racism that still hangs over our nation today.

The joy of liberation inevitably includes a confrontation with oppression. In fact the one cannot come without the other. Malachi and Luke chapter 3 speak to that side of the equation. God is most certainly the actor who brings redemption and liberation and salvation to us and but that work is always incarnational. This is a church word. What I mean is that the work is done in the human realm. It happens in context and through human beings. Luke chapter 3 sets the context for the ministry of John and then Jesus. This is a specific time and place. The work God would do would push against the powers who were standing in the way of the realm of God. Luke names those powers from the Emperor to the Governor, to the local rulers . He even names the high priests who ruled within the temple system of God's own people. God was coming to bring redemption and it would happen within this context among these rulers and this structure. If any of them were standing in the way of the good and beautiful life that God intends for us then they would be confronted. The joy of liberation inevitably includes confrontation with oppression.

Malachi understood this reality. So even as he celebrates the promise that the "Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple" – will show up at just the right time as I talked about with the children – he had the wherewithal to ask the question "but who can endure the day of this coming?" Anything that is not right is going to be confronted. It will be like a refiner's fire and fire burns. It's obvious how glorious it is when the dawn from on high breaks upon us if we are the ones who have been

oppressed and the breaking light brings about our freedom. If we are the ones who need to be confronted then that dawn - not so glorious!

Here's the case I want to make to you today (I'm going to do it by mixing metaphors so I want to prepare you for that): even when we are going through the refiner's fire - when something in us is being confronted -- the dawn when it breaks will be glorious for us as well. A simpler way to say it is: bring on the refiner's fire! bring on John the Baptist and his call to repentance! bring on that fire that hurts like "hee-haw" (I want to swear but my mother's in the room.)

But I am serious. If there are places in us or in our church or in our nation that are causing people harm - if we are a part of the problem that is draining beauty or the goodness of life from those around us - then we need to be confronted! We need those parts of us to be burned away so that we can offer something that will be pleasing to God; be a part of that harvest of righteousness Philippians speaks of; be a part of making the pathway for the Lord.

I have a testimony that I want to share about a time this summer when I felt the dawn break after a season - a long season - of refinement that the Spirit of God was doing with me. I know that many of you think of me as a relatively kind human being and I am some of the time but not all of the time. It's probably those who are closest to me who receive the brunt of those moments when I am not. When I get angry - especially if I think of it as righteous anger - I can be harsh with my words. The judgment that spews from my lips is cutting. I've known this about myself for a long time - that I can go there. I used to do it in more public settings. I've gotten a handle on that over the years. But the place where I can still let loose was in my most intimate relationships.

I had been working for six years or more trying to get a hold of non-violent communication¹: to stop judging and blaming people when something happens that triggers pain in me or someone I love. And instead get in touch with the needs that I have in those moments and find a way to bring

¹ Marshall Rosenberg developed this work in his book *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life - Create Your Life, Your Relationships, and Your World in Harmony with your Values* (Encinitas, CA: Puddle Dancer Press, 2003). There is a large community across the world who practices and teaches this way of communicating also called Compassionate Communication.

some compassion to what it is that I need and what it is that this other person needs and then to make some requests that try to get as many of those met for both us as we possibly can. I had gotten some skill around this in many places of my life but not so much in the heat of the moment in my family. I was confronted about it earlier this year. The Spirit convicted me. It hurt to see the truth about the harm that I was causing. So I prayed and I worked at it. And part of the work was letting go of my need to be right. Who cares at the end of the day who is right? Let's get down to the business of making this world the good and beautiful place God intends it to be.

The first time that I made it through one of those heated moments and found a way to continue to be kind instead of going for the jugular it was like the dawn from on high breaking in. (I am aware that this is almost trivial compared to the enormity of what I began with this morning but I share it as an example of what it is I mean.) And, for me in that moment, it was glorious! I look back now and I can truly name that moment of confrontation as glorious as well because in that repentance (in that turning around) I met God's grace and it was good because it let me present an offering to God and to my loved ones that was pleasing.

There is a movement in these texts that is the same whether you are the one being liberated or the one being confronted. The next step is the same. What you are to do after repentance is the same as what you are to do after liberation: offer something that is pleasing to God² - serve without fear³ - let love overflow more and more⁴ - to prepare the way of the Lord so that all flesh shall see the salvation of God⁵!

"By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us to light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace⁶."

Amen.

² Malachi 3.3, NRSV

³ Luke 1.74, NRSV

⁴ Philippians 1.9, NRSV

⁵ Luke 3.4-6, NRSV

⁶ Luke 1.78-79, NRSV