

LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

A sermon by Scotty McLennan, Dean for Religious Life
Memorial Church, Stanford University
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Hope abounds tonight. No matter how dark it may get, we remember together tonight that one small candle can pierce that darkness. Then its light can be diffused and spread far and wide. Hope abounds tonight. No matter how short the days and no matter how long the nights, the winter solstice comes with the promise of the steady lengthening of the days ahead, of more light each morning and of more light each evening. Hope abounds tonight. We may be surrounded by death and destruction, suffering and grief, but then tomorrow there's new life among us in the person of a newborn baby. The joy is irresistible and spreads through all who gaze upon the child. Hope abounds tonight.

The passage you heard from the Prophet Isaiah in the Hebrew Bible is set soon after the Syro-Ephraimitic War, 734 years before Christ. It seems to celebrate the birth of a new crown prince for Judea.¹ Wrapped in the messy world of politics, the central message is: now that the rod of the oppressor has been broken, the baby's birth and its celebration are signs of hope and grounds for confidence in the future.² The passage includes powerful images of illumination: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness -- on them light has shined." That light is not just figurative. The passage encourages us to imagine a huge postwar bonfire, literally burning up the trappings of violence and oppression: "For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire."³

There are also great, triumphal names applied to the recently born crown prince, reminiscent of Egyptian throne names given to the pharaoh:⁴ "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."⁵ The ancient promise of a son of David on the throne of Judea is reaffirmed, and the political prophecy is that the future king's reign will be one of endless peace, founded on justice, and dedicated to bringing to an end forever the dark, harsh, bloody military alternative.⁶ The gospel account of the birth of Jesus hearkens back to the narrative in Isaiah, not only in the birth of a baby in King David's line, but also of one with great names like Savior, Messiah, and Lord, and one who comes with a message of peace on earth in the face of oppression. Political realities again are in the forefront, as we're told that the Roman governor, Quirinius, has ordered a forced registration of everyone under Roman occupation. Not only that, but all people currently outside the district in which they were born are required to make the often-arduous journey back to their own home town to be registered.⁷ Joseph and Mary are forced to do so even though she's about to deliver her firstborn child. Sure enough, Mary goes through childbirth en route. Even worse, they can't find a place to stay with the newborn and are forced to bed down with animals in a stable and to lay the baby in a feeding trough.

Yet, hope abounded that night. In Luke's account, shepherds were visited by angels who told them of the child's birth, described as "good news of great joy for all the

people."⁸ After seeing him, the shepherds returned to their fields glorifying and praising God and telling everybody about what they had experienced.

I think many of us have heard the description of Jesus' birth so many times now that we've forgotten how radical and dramatic the story really is, especially in its theological implications. For example, a lot of us have a positive, pastoral image of those visiting shepherds, when in fact shepherding was a despised occupation in those days. "Shepherds were scorned as shiftless, dishonest people, who grazed their flocks on others' lands."⁹ So, instead of the worldly crown prince image that seems to be presented in Isaiah, this picture is of a humble-origin newborn, lying in a feeding trough in a barn, visited first by the lowly, the despised and the outcast.

The Christian claim is scandalous. Instead of God entering human history in splendor, God slips unobtrusively into a small occupied province far from the center of worldly power, as a helpless baby, born to a couple who've not yet married, born on the road and bedded down in a stable, visited first by shepherds instead of royalty. In the Christian story, God identifies from the very start with the powerless, the oppressed, the poor and the homeless.¹⁰ Hope abounds tonight, because God stands with us in our brokenness.

This hasn't been an easy fall for us here in America since September 11, even if we are citizens of the most powerful nation on earth in our own time. Many of us have felt depressed and afraid, or have fallen prey to deadly sins like anger and arrogance. I was struck by the cover story of yesterday's Parade magazine, though. It was entitled "We Have a Reason to Hope." In it, Lisa Beamer, the widow of a man who died trying to retake hijacked Flight 93, writes of how September 11 has caused so many people to look deeper, to find deep resources of love and concern for fellow human beings, here at home and throughout the world.

She also describes life now with her three-year-old and one-year-old sons: "One day, I want my kids to understand what happened on September 11 and why their daddy was able to do what he did. I want them to realize that they can grow up to be like him. It's definitely going to be hard this holiday. But little kids keep you focused on the here and now. That's good, because it forces me to look up and find whatever joy I can muster, rather than allow this dark cloud to overshadow my whole life. I think that's what Christmas will be like this year. There will be moments of sadness, but there will also be moments of joy."¹¹

As she says, "Little kids keep you focused." I spent some time on Friday with a Stanford professor and his five-week-old baby. That baby is keeping him and his wife focused, for sure. Part of that focus is a sense of utter awe. As he put it, "There's this untarnished, unsullied being at the center of our lives now. He's the epitome of innocence in the world, and we're lucky enough to have him with us every minute."

Whether or not there's a baby in each of our lives at the moment, hope abounds tonight. The potential for renewal of life, represented by the Christ-child, belongs to all of us. That's true in our personal spiritual lives, and it's also true for us as human beings in community. Robert McAfee Brown, a former Stanford professor and dean of this church, who died this year, stood here on Christmas Eve in 1972 during the Vietnam War, and began his sermon with these words, "I'm sure some of you are saying to yourselves, 'I hope this is one time he leaves politics out of the pulpit.'" Yet, as he explained, and as I pointed out earlier, he couldn't, "For the simple reason that the Christmas story itself is all wrapped up in the world of politics."¹² The Christmas story

confronts us with the demand to work tirelessly in the world for peace and justice, to help bring light to the darkness. Right now there are people equally committed to that task in military uniform and in civilian attire working as peace activists and defenders of liberty and justice for all.

Finally, though, let us never forget that in both Isaiah and Luke, God's call for peace and justice in the world, and for deep personal joy in our lives, are made tangible -- are made real, are made flesh -- in the weakest and most vulnerable of all human creatures, a little baby. Hope abounds tonight.

¹ New Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. VI, p. 121.

² Ibid., p. 124.

³ Isaiah 9: 5.

⁴ New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VI, p. 123.

⁵ Isaiah 9: 6.

⁶ New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VI, p. 124.

⁷ Jerome Biblical Commentary (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), Vol. II, p. 124.

⁸ Luke 2: 10.

⁹ New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX, p. 65.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 67.

¹¹ As quoted in Lyric Wallwork Winik, "We Have a Reason to Hope," Parade magazine, San Jose Mercury News (Sunday, December 23, 2001), p. 5.

¹² Robert McAfee Brown, Speaking of Christianity (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), p. 98.