

“The new day that Christmas points to”

December 12, 2010

Text: Isaiah 35:1-10, Luke 1:46-55

I.

Don't we all like having something to look forward to, something to anticipate with excitement and expectation?

Certainly, when times are tough, with the economy and our family finances ... with health concerns; with family issues and worries that keep us awake at night, we want to look forward to a new day, a day when things will be different—when there will be a recasting and reordering.

As we move inexorably toward the birth at Bethlehem, the scriptures of Advent recall what God has done, in both the distant and near past. But they mostly point forward to the **new day** that is on the horizon, to the new era that is already breaking forth. Undeniably, these scriptures—the voices of poets—bear *good news* for people of faith.

The **new day** that Christmas points to is a day of uncontainable promise and hope. It is the promise that—always—the spirit is on the move; and it is the hope that love and good-will will have their day and that, ultimately, they cannot be held back.

II.

In South African **Alan Patton's** book, *Cry, the Beloved Country*, a young idealistic South African lawyer, named Arthur Jarvis, is killed by the son of South African pastor, Stephen Kumalo.

As it turns out, Arthur Jarvis has just finished writing a book about the need for justice in his hate-ravaged native land. When the pastor seeks out the father of Arthur Jarvis to appeal for forgiveness for his son's awful crime, a series of intriguing events unfolds.

While the father didn't necessarily share his son's passion for working against the evils of apartheid, in order to make sense of his son's life, he begins to immerse himself in his son's book. Gaining a new sense of his son's commitments, he is able to receive pastor Kumalo in a more kindly manner.

In any event, in the weeks that follow, the elder Jarvis (a man of considerable financial means) is able to embrace a new perspective ... to the extent where ...

1. He promises to help build a new church for pastor Kumalo's congregation (keep in mind, it was pastor Kumalo's son who had killed his son).

2. Beyond that, the distraught father offers to build a dam for a local village so the people will have year-round access to fresh water.

The point for us (in this season of Advent) is that as the rumor of these future events circulates, a shock-wave of hope rises up throughout the village.

People begin to embrace life with a new spirit. Soon there will be water for irrigation. They'll be able to raise cattle. And because there will be more than enough food to go around, the young people won't have to rush off to the cities to find work. This anticipated *good news* makes all the difference.

And yet, nothing actual or concrete has happened. It's all in the realm of *probable expectation*. About this, **Alan Paton** makes the compelling point that ... ***Although nothing has come yet, something is here already.***

The *something* that is here is the expectation of the season. It is the ***new day that Christmas points to.***

III.

Again, this **new day** that our scriptures point to is a day that, unmistakably, opens up the future. It is a future that cannot be held back by the constraints of yesterday. Our reading from **Isaiah 35**, for example, speaks with poetic vision about the **new day** ahead.

Isaiah 35 is almost for sure part of the preaching of **Second Isaiah**, the great prophet of the Exile (Isaiah 40-55). The language points to the **new day** that is close at hand—a day when the exiles will be free to return to their homeland, the land of Judah, and to Jerusalem, the holy city. For decades, now, they have been living in a foreign land and wondering—forever—***how long, Lord, how long?***

But now the spirit is rising up; hope and promise are on the move; a **new day** is on the horizon. A day when ...

*The eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless shall sing for joy.*

Oh what a day! Like the **new day that Christmas points to** ... a day when ...
*The waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;
The burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water;*

And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way ...for it shall be for God's people. And the ransomed of the earth shall return (all the exiles, living all these years in Babylon); and they shall come to Zion with singing and everlasting joy and gladness shall be theirs.

And, just as with the people in the South African village, even though nothing actual had happened yet, a new HOPE is in the air. Every day is filled with more promise. The people do not awake to one more day of darkness and drudgery, but to the **new day** that is breaking through.

This is the hope of Advent.

IV.

In an Advent reflection, **William Willimon**, a bishop of the United Methodist Church in Alabama, said,

Advent people are people waiting, yearning, leaning forward, standing on tiptoe for something better. The future belongs to those who wait expectantly ... to those who know we are meant for something better.

1. Something better than a life of discouragement and hopelessness in Babylon.
2. Something better than a life of daily drudgery and misery in South Africa.
3. Something better than a protracted life of unemployment or underemployment in the United States.
4. Something better than a polarized nation and a gridlocked congress.

The **new day that Christmas points to** springs forth from the manger at Bethlehem, from the much anticipated and hoped for birth of the one in whom and through whom God would reveal God's purposes.

Born into a manger of straw in a lowly stable to the most humble of parents. Christmas comes through the humble, the lowly, the vulnerable and dependent precisely to identify God's preferential option *for the poor*, *for the little ones*, for the ones who so often are left out and abandoned.

Clearly, through such an incarnation, a note of justice sounds out. The **new day that Christmas points to** is a day of new freedom and hope for all peoples. It is a day about which Mary sang, as a powerful sense of God's presence fills her spirit:

And my spirit rejoices in God my savior ...for the mighty one has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

*He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;
He has filled the hungry with good things ...*

Christmas points to a transcendent day of hope, of *peace with justice* for all peoples. This is God's vision. Building on this, the psalmist, too, captures the essence of God's truth. Hear these words from **Psalm 146** (another of our Advent readings) ... about the God ...

*Who executes justice for the oppressed; Who gives food to the hungry.
Who sets the prisoners free and opens the eyes of the blind; the God who Lifts up those
who are bowed down, watches over strangers and upholds the orphan and the widow.*

This **new day that Christmas points to** is a day of liberation and renewal for all people, a day when we see clearly who we are and what we are created for. Oh what a day!

V.

In the novel and movie, ***Shawshank Redemption***, a lifelong convict named Red keeps telling his fellow prisoner, Andy, to *stop talking about hope*. *In prison, he says, hope is a dangerous thing. It's better to live without hope than to have a hope that will torment you by never being fulfilled.*

But then, one day Andy barricades himself in the warden's office, flips on the Shawshank prison P.A. system and plays a portion of a Mozart opera. As the power of the music reaches throughout the cells and corridors, the entire prison is brought to a standstill, listening to the *aria* that is being sung.

And even Red, the one who resisted all the talk of hopes or dreams ... Red cannot resist the spark of beauty that has filled the air.

I have no idea what those two Italian ladies were singin' about, he muses, but I tell you, those voices soared higher and farther than anybody in prison dares to dream. It was like some beautiful bird flapped into our drab little cage and made those walls dissolve away. For the briefest of moments, every last man at Shawshank was free.

Let the **new day that Christmas points to** draw us all in. Let it remind us—again and again—of who we are and what we are called to.

And so, as Advent unfolds, let our waiting be a focused waiting—leaning forward, standing on our tiptoes, looking for something better, expecting something better. Let **the new day** be born and let the love of Christmas sing through our spirit!

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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