



breadfortheworld
HAVE FAITH. END HUNGER.

December 25, 2009
Christmas Day—Dawn
Noelle Damico

RCL: Isaiah 62:6-12; Psalm 97; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:(1-7) 8-20
LM: Isaiah 62:11-12; Psalm 97:1, 6, 11-12; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:15-20

How do we live the promise of God when the glow of a snug candlelit eve gives way to the depressing reality that things still seem the same? What's different between last night and this morning? Has anything changed? Has anyone been changed?

Our passages for this morning are troubling ones. Isaiah and the psalmist experience God as a vengeful and forgetful judge, one who rewards the faithful with good things and rescues them from the hand of the wicked, but who needs reminders of what has been promised and must even be badgered into upholding these promises.

In Isaiah, God promises, "I will not again give your grain to be food for your enemies, and foreigners shall not drink the wine for which you have labored" (62:8). But the very words "I will not again give" imply that at one time God did indeed give the people's grain as food for their enemies. Perhaps that is why sentinels are posted on the walls of Jerusalem—to badger God into establishing the city and to remind God to keep God's promises. God seems to need correction from the people: remember, God, you ought not to give our food to enemies because *we* are your people. Remember our covenant! It is strange to have such a passage on Christmas dawn. In what sense do we need to remind God to keep God's promises?

And Mary is clearly worried as well. Despite the shepherds' message that confirms Jesus' significance to his earthly parents and those around them, Luke tells us that Mary "treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart" (2:19). This phrase recurs a chapter later when Mary discovers Jesus pursuing his "father's business" with the teachers in the Temple. Commenting on the phrase, New Testament scholar Beverly Gaventa suggests that it might better be translated "'keeps' these things, much as Jacob kept events surrounding the troublesome Joseph (Gen 37:11) or Daniel kept his visions (Dan 7:28). These events perplex and trouble Mary, who turns them over again and again and again."¹

1. Beverly Gaventa, J. Clinton McCann, and James D. Newsome, *Texts for Preaching*, compiled by Charles Cousar (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994) 74.



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And troubled she should well be. The shepherds use the title of “savior” for Jesus, the same honorific borne by a variety of Roman emperors who busily established the *pax Romana* while expanding the Roman Empire. What sort of conflict does such a title portend? Will God remember God’s promise? What will Jesus need to face in his life? What will God’s empire look like? What will it cost to achieve? Mary worries and wonders.

Psalm 97 appears most concerned to get our worship right—to confirm that the faithful pay homage to the God above all gods and not a poor or impotent substitute. Here it seems that Israel must be reminded to be faithful to the one God, just as in Isaiah Israel reminded God to be faithful to them.

And the letter to Titus troubles us further. A far cry from the radical reversals hailed by Mary’s *Magnificat*, the writer of Titus does not expect (nor, presumably, want) social and economic change to accompany God’s coming. Throughout the letter the writer is concerned with what we might today call personal morality (quarreling, envy, the need to show courtesy and embody self-control). God’s “loving-kindness” in no way challenges or jeopardizes the rulers and authorities to whom Christians are to be subject and obedient (v. 1).²

As Bread for the World members, we are people committed to legislative and social changes that will benefit poor and hungry people. And honestly, sometimes we nurse a degree of ambivalence as we labor for a better world. We wonder about the compromises we make in the light of day to get the “best” legislation passed that we can. Is good enough really good enough? Are we rearranging deck chairs on a sinking ship? How much power do we really have? And even in the best of times, when we succeed in winning a major legislative victory, we know that it is still not enough.

But despite the uncertainties, the promise of God’s mercy and power reverberate through these texts. Though we are not always sure how to make sense of the discontinuities between promise and reality, we live forward, reminding God to be God and doing what we can in the light of day. Perhaps this morning after, the best encouragement we have comes from an old Jewish saying, “You are not required to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.”³ May we treasure these things in our hearts.

2. Linda M. Maloney, “The Pastoral Epistles,” in *Searching the Scriptures*, vol. 2: *A Feminist Commentary*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994) 361–380.

3. Mishnah Avot Chapter 2:21, attributed to Rebbi Tarfon.



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Children's Time [LH]

Today's reflections are pretty serious ones. At this time of the Christmas observance it will be hard to bring that seriousness into a children's time. But the helpful thing to remind children may be that while today is different from other days, it is also much the same—our daily lives continue. Did we get out of bed today, and brush our teeth, and put on clothes, and come to church? Jesus comes to us in the midst of our daily lives and gives us new ways to think about how we live each day. The meaning of Christmas is not just the joy we feel today, but the joy of Jesus we bring into tomorrow and next week and next year.

Musical Suggestions

Awake! Awake, and Greet the New Morn—*The New Century Hymnal* 107

O Loving Founder of the Stars—*The New Century Hymnal* 111

Watchman, Tell Us of the Night—*The Presbyterian Hymnal* 20, *The New Century Hymnal* 103

It Came Upon the Midnight Clear—*The Presbyterian Hymnal* 38, *The United Methodist Hymnal* 218, *The New Century Hymnal* 131, *Lutheran Book of Worship* 54

Reflection from Hunger for the Word, Year C

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