

The Righteous Branch

I Thessalonians 3:9-13

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One of these things is not like the others. That is a game I think I first learned on Sesame Street, where they would put several things before us and we had to guess which one was not like the others. I am going to give you three things and have you guess which of these three things is not like the others.

1. I wanted to get in the holiday cheer so I searched my radio and found a holiday station, and now if you see me driving through the streets of Westerly you might see me rocking around the Christmas Tree, walking in a Winter Wonderland, or doing the Jingle Bell Rock.
2. I went back and found one of my favorite Christmas stories, one from a wonderful little book that says everything I really need to know I learned in Kindergarten. It goes like this:

A Sunday afternoon some days before Christmas...I was jarred by a pounding at the door. Now what? Deep sigh. Opening it, resigned to accept whatever bad news lies in wait, I am nonplussed. A rather small person in a cheap Santa Claus mask, carrying a large brown paper bag outthrust: "TRICK OR TREAT!" Santa Mask shouts. What? "TRICK OR TREAT!" Santa Mask hoots again. Tongue-tied, I stare at this apparition. He shakes the bag at me, and dumbly I fish out my wallet and find a dollar to drop into the bag. The mask lifts, and it is an Asian kid with a ten-dollar grin taking up most of his face. 'Wanta hear some caroling?' he asks, in singsong English.

I know him now. He belongs to a family settled into the neighborhood by the Quakers last year. He came with what were called the boat people. Vietnamese, I believe. Refugees. He stopped by at Halloween with his sisters and brothers, and I filled their bags. Hong Duc is his name-he's maybe eight. At Halloween he looked like a Wise Man, with a bathrobe and a dish towel around his head. 'Wanta hear some caroling?'

“I nod, envisioning an octet of urchin refugees hiding in the bushes ready to join their leader in uplifted song. ‘Sure, where’s the choir?”

‘I’m it,’ he says. And he launched forth with an up-tempo chorus of ‘Jingle Bells,’ at full lung power. This was followed by an equally enthusiastic rendering of what I swear sounded like ‘Hark, the Hairy Angels Sing.’ And finally, a soft-voiced, reverential singing of ‘Silent Night.’ Head back, eyes closed, from the bottom of his heart he poured out the last strains of ‘Sleep in heavenly peace’ into the gathering night.

“Wet-eyed, dumbstruck by his performance, I pulled a five-dollar bill out of my wallet and dropped that into the paper bag. In return he produced half a candy cane from his pocket and passed it solemnly to me. Flashing the ten-dollar grin, he turned and ran from my porch, shouted ‘GOD BLESS YOU,’ and ‘TRICK OR TREAT’ and was gone.

Who was that masked kid? Hong Duc, the one-man choir, delivering Christmas door to door...Trick or treat! After I shut the door came near hysteria-laughter and tears and that funny feeling you get when you know that once again Christmas has come to you. Right down the chimney of my midwinter hovel comes Saint Hong Duc. He is confused about the details, but he is very clear about the spirit of the season.”¹

3. I did something with you all this morning. We did something together as a congregation. We lit an Advent candle, the candle of hope.

So there are the three things. I turned on a station filled with Christmas songs. I found a favorite Christmas story. And I lit a candle, an Advent Candle, the Candle of Hope. One of these things is not like the others. If you guessed the Advent Candle you are right. When we light an Advent Candle we in essence are saying there is a darkness so deep, so profound, that unless God intervenes in our world we would always sit in darkness, we would always be in a dungeon of despair. This darkness cannot be remedied by switching station dials on a radio, even it does bring us to some happy holiday music. This darkness is so devastating that simply turning to a favorite story, even a story that warms our heart, cannot push back the darkness. This darkness can only be answered, can only be addressed by a God who intervenes, a God who pierces the darkness. When we light an Advent Candle, we are giving witness that we believe there is such a God, and that our God has done such a thing as pierce the darkness.

¹ Robert Fulghum, All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten, 90-03.

Something we should never forget about Advent is that in this season of preparation we take seriously the darkness of this world, the darkness of evil forces, and the darkness of our own lives. Even as we lit our candle this morning, the candle of hope, we read from the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah knew darkness. One commentator describes the situation at the time Jeremiah wrote, “The people...are taken captive, dragged from their land, and deprived of their Temple. They are beaten, imprisoned, and face death as a people, and, like Jeremiah, they cry out to God in anger and despair.”² John Calvin paints an equally bleak picture. “As they were then exposed to slaughter...the children of God saw thousand deaths; so that it could not be but that terror almost drove them to despair; and in their exile they saw that they were far removed from their own country, without any hope of a return.”³

When you face that depth of darkness, when you encounter that degree of despair, it is not enough to switch your radio station to holiday music or rustle up a favorite Christmas story. You need a God who can pierce the darkness. That is what we are enacting when we light an Advent Candle. That is what we are enacting when we light the candle of hope. We worship the God who intervenes in our world in ways that confront the darkness, that pierce the darkness, and that bring light and healing and hope out of the darkness. One of these things is not like the others. No, it is not like the others at all.

There is an image in Jeremiah that is very provocative. Much of the book of Jeremiah can best be described as God and the prophet trying to get the people of God to take God seriously. What has befallen the people is a direct result of their idolatry, their disobedience, their failure to walk in the ways of God, their failure to practice love and justice and righteousness and mercy, particularly toward the weak and the vulnerable. So in chapter 18, in yet another effort to get the people to take God seriously, Jeremiah goes to the house of a potter. At the potter’s house he sees the potter working at his wheel, the clay in his hands, spinning and shaping a pot. But the pot doesn’t turn out exactly right. There are flaws in the clay and the pot that is being shaped is marred. So the potter simply breaks the clay down and begins again. The clay is soft and malleable and so it can be worked with until the final product is suitable.

² Kathleen O’Connor, Jeremiah, in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, 174

³ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, 247. (O’Connor and Calvin are quoted in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume I, page 4 by Jennifer Ryan Ayres)

That wouldn't be a difficult message for us this morning. If the message about Advent is that there are some imperfections, some flaws, some shortcomings, and that we just need to be reshaped and repaired and rebuilt, we could accept that message. But chapter 18 turns to chapter 19, and the people of God have not repented, have not allowed God to change them, to shape them, or to reform them. In chapter 19 Jeremiah no longer goes to the potter's house where the potter is working with soft and malleable clay. In Jeremiah 19 the Lord instructs Jeremiah to buy a pot, one already formed and hardened into its final shape. The symbolism is powerful. This pot cannot be worked with, it has become fixed and hardened and it will not change. So Jeremiah takes the pot, representing a hardened and hard-hearted people and at the instruction of the Lord Jeremiah breaks the pot. The pot shatters into tiny bits and pieces and fragments. We are told it can no longer be repaired.

Now suddenly Advent becomes a very difficult message for us. Advent is not a summons to make some minor adjustments in our life, to tweak things, to get our tires rebalanced and our engine tuned up, to make some cosmetic changes. Advent invites us into a world that is shattered beyond repair. Remember what John Calvin said? "The terror almost drove them to despair; and in their exile they saw that they were far removed from their own country, without any hope of a return." To a people about to be shattered beyond repair, the prophet is bold enough to speak a word of hope, a word about a Righteous Branch that will come, a Righteous Branch who will bring salvation, who will even bring safety. The prophet is bold enough to light an Advent Candle of hope, not because he has the power to enact such change and transformation. The prophet is bold because the Lord has made a promise, and if the prophet has learned one thing about God, it is that God keeps his promise.

Rather than simply telling you that God keeps his promise, I would like to show you an example of how God keeps his promise. We just read about it in Paul's first letter to the church in Thessalonica. Paul is writing to a church that has experienced hardship and trouble, trials and tribulations. They have experienced severe suffering. (I Thessalonians 1:6) When a phrase like severe suffering is used in the New Testament, it is never used lightly. Paul's first visit to Thessalonica caused such a violent reaction that a mob formed and started a riot, and if the riot in Thessalonica was like the others in the New Testament, beatings and lashes and perhaps even death would have resulted. The disciples had to flee persecution in Jerusalem. They were hunted down and put in prison. Not all of them. Not all of the time. But it happened. It happened to Paul and apparently it happened to this fledgling group of believers in Thessalonica, who experienced severe suffering. Perhaps we need to hear that today, in a world where the threat level has increased and things we once took for granted could potentially be situations filled with

harm. The earliest believers faced severe suffering and threats and persecution and violence and even death.

In Jeremiah the people facing their own brand of suffering were overwhelmed with fear and anxiety. When Paul writes to the church in Thessalonica, a church facing severe suffering, he lifts them up with a thankful prayer for their work that has been produced by faith, their labor that has been prompted by love, and their endurance which has been inspired by their hope in Jesus Christ their Lord. Except Paul says he is Jesus Christ *our* Lord. He is not Lord of just a select group. No, Jesus is Lord of all who call on his name. And when Jesus is Lord, faith overcomes fear. Faith overcomes fear and God gives to followers of Jesus endurance that is inspired by hope, hope in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Faith like this doesn't come easy. When Jesus came, he didn't come to work with soft and malleable clay, like the potter in Jeremiah 18. He found a world filled with resistance and rebellion. He told a parable where the Son of God comes to earth and the people of the earth reject him and rise up against him. He did not find an earth ready to make a few small changes and to get a tune-up and be back on track. He found a world that needed a complete resurrection, a complete new beginning. And to get to that point he had to be shattered. He told his disciples numerous times that the Son of Man would be beaten and betrayed and would suffer and die. He would be shattered and crushed. And then...and then God would do what only God can do. God would take the shattered pieces, which to the whole world and to his defeated disciples looked like utter failure, God would take those shattered pieces and from dry and dead bones, he would bring life. Jesus Christ rose from the dead, and his followers believed him when he promised that same resurrection life to them. They had hope even in the face of severe suffering. They had hope even in the face of death.

When we light an Advent Candle, any of the Advent Candles, every one of the Advent Candles, when we light the Advent Candle of hope, we are confessing that we believe there is a light that not only shines in the darkness, there is a light that pierces the darkness. There is a light that drives out fear and fills the people of God with hope. We are confessing that we believe even when everything around us seems shattered and crushed and broken beyond repair, we are confessing God does more than repair...God resurrects. God resurrects.

We lit the candle of hope this morning. Do we believe in the resurrection? Do we believe in the God who takes what is shattered and crushed and broken beyond any human means of repairing, do we believe our God is able to resurrect?

Friend of ours was diagnosed with lung cancer. She was married and had two young boys, and she herself was young, just in her 40's. She faced her cancer with hope. God gave her courage in the midst of fear. When she died we mourned her death. When she died we searched for hope. At some point one of her favorite pastimes gave us a window on her faith. She loved to work in her garden. We thought about that a long time before God nudged us and said, "She liked to garden." Oh! She planted seeds in the ground. Then she waited. Jesus said something about seeds. "Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." (John 12:24) Our friend Becky had practiced resurrection a thousand times, putting a seed in the ground, watching it die, and then seeing how God in his marvelous mystery and grace brought life out of death. Why do we believe that about flowers, but find it so hard to believe about our own lives. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." (John 11:25) Jesus said that at the tomb of his friend Lazarus. And after he said it he asked, "Do you believe this?" Yes, Lord, yes! We do believe. And so we light a candle, we light a candle of hope, because we believe you are the light that pierces the darkness. We believe you are the resurrection and the life.

Sometimes God gives us a little extra touch of grace, to let us know this resurrection stuff is really true. It is enough that Jesus rose. Even so, sometimes God gives a little extra touch of grace. Becky's husband is named David. A few weeks after Becky died David pulled me aside and told me a story. David and Becky lived in Houston, and they were in Houston when Becky died. David said the morning Becky died a friend of David's named Ken called him that very morning at 5 am. Ken lived in Oklahoma, and he called David at 5 am in Houston the morning Becky died. After the memorial service for Becky, Ken told David he woke up very early that morning. He took his dog out for a walk in the woods. While they were walking that calm and quiet morning, Ken said he felt a voice was telling him to look up in the tree. When he looked up, Ken saw Becky in the tree. She said to him, "Call David." It was 5 am, and this figure, looking for all the world like Becky, a woman dying of cancer, was sitting in the tree telling him to call David. When Ken called, David picked up the phone, and it was right after Becky had died.

I don't claim to know all that meant. I don't even want to try to explain it or even analyze it. But I do believe it is a sign that death is not the end. I believe it is a sign that darkness is not the end. And because of that I believe that despair and doubt and worry and fear are not the things God desires to have filling our lives. And so in closing I hold up to you this fledgling church in Thessalonica, a church that had endured severe suffering and in the midst of that severe suffering were filled with joy by the Holy Spirit. This fledgling church knew one thing. They knew that Jesus Christ had risen from the dead and he was with them, with them in every situation they faced. And there was an apostle who loved them dearly who saw in these bold believers their work that was produced by faith, their labor that was prompted by love, and their endurance that was inspired by their hope in Jesus Christ. That is the type of church God has called us to be. It is Advent, my dear friends. We have done something bold. We have lit a candle, because we believe God has pierced the darkness. We have lit a candle of hope. Like those brothers and sisters in Thessalonica, "May God strengthen our hearts so that we will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones." (I Thessalonians 3:13)