

Mercy and Might
Isaiah 9:1-7; 40:6-11
Luke 1:39-56

“...for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him, from generation to generation.”

Luke 1:49-50

In this season that majors in human longing, we are creatures who scan not only space but time itself, asking after the God for whom we wait and of whom Mary sings. “I have to look in cracks and crevices,” writes poet Rod Jellema,

Don't tell me how God's mercy
is as wide as the ocean, as deep as the sea.
I already believe it, but that infinite prospect
gets farther away the more we mouth it.
I thank you for lamenting his absences--
from marriages going mad, from the deaths
of your son and mine, from the inescapable
terrors of history: Treblinka. Viet Nam.
September Eleven. It's hard to celebrate
his invisible Presence in the sacrament
while seeing his visible absence in the world.

What shall we sing of God's invisible Presence and visible absence as the proud tremble before volatile markets in the imaginations of their hearts? As the mighty are being toppled from their thrones, one despot at a time? As those of low degree are stirring in streets across the globe or hiding in hovels because of recent evictions? As the foreclosed are sent empty away while bankers are filled with a trillion good things? A carol's sweet sentiment cannot compete with world politics, nor “should religion meddle in the affairs of state.” We have been told this from the cradle to the courthouse.

Nevertheless, Luke locates Jesus' birth in time: in the political and social details of his day. Chapter One: "In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah..."; Chapter Two: "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus (a.k.a. Octavius, the Prince of Peace) that all the world should be enrolled..."; Chapter Three: "In the fifteenth year of the

reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Iturea and Traconitus and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came...." No once upon a time will do! Rather, Luke surrounds the savior of the world with the world that is too much with us, the world held hopelessly within the confines of the present tense where we long for God's mercy and might to be visibly present.

"Future tenses," writes George Steiner in words you have heard before, "are an idiom of the messianic. Take away energizing anticipation, the luminous imperative of waiting, and these tenses will be end-stopped. 'Life expectancy' is, then, no longer a messianic...projection, but an actuarial statistic." In this present tense ruled by monetary might and military power, "if" has disappeared imperceptibly from common speech. We need no longer teach our children the conjugation of the verb "to be." Rather we content ourselves "with the morning that separates/And with the evening that brings together/For casual talk before the fire..." [T.S. Eliot] a people resigned to the despotism of the present tense.

Not coincidentally and in spite of everything we have been told about Israel's messianic expectations, the people who walked in the darkness of the 8th century B.C. in Judah, who dwelt in the land of deep darkness under the siege of Syria and Israel, were also a people whose future tense had been eclipsed by present politics. When Isaiah first spoke light into their darkness, no doubt the words were heard to ignite, at most, a present hope: that Hezekiah would be enthroned king over Judah from David's line. "Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness," proclaimed Isaiah.

But Isaiah says more, insinuating upon the impending political arrangements another tense. He speaks first in the past tense of present reality [*the people who walked in*

darkness...where we seem to walk still]; he declares, from out of the depth of that same darkness, what Judah could never imagine, nor can we: declares in past perfect [*the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light...: How did we miss this? When did we blink?*]; and then, as though the dawn were revealing an unforeseen syntax, he exclaims in present perfect [*to us a child is born, a son is given...for Judah a king, while our minds cannot help but expect God's visible presence hidden in flesh*]. Yet even the present perfect will not contain the news he has to tell. Only the future tense will do: "*Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, from this time forth and for evermore, will reign! The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this.*" We have taken this tense as the crack in the door of Israel's hope, a crevice that ultimately warrants our running with haste to Bethlehem. Still, it will be half a millennium before the darkness of that silent night is dispelled by angel voices.

In the meantime, David's line does reign again in the land of Judah, but darkness ultimately descends and the eclipse of hope is complete, a mere one hundred years later: "the failure of Jerusalem, the end of its hegemony, the deportation of Israel, and the reality of exile, [mark] a dismal ending that was the termination of all old faith claims," says Walter Brueggemann. "The public, institutional life of Judah came to an end. But beyond that Israel made the theological judgment that Yahweh had now abandoned Israel and had nullified all the old promises."

The God of Israel fell silent. Only the sound of weeping could be heard in Babylon. Ezekiel moved "among the deported as a pastor, listening to them complain that God was not fair." Jeremiah spoke judgment, then comfort to the people, assuring them in the midst of exile that the uprooted would be planted again. Yet among these prophets of old, Second Isaiah's words still pierce the winter darkness with their promise. In the invisible presence of God's visible absence, Second Isaiah speaks hope to Israel's despair, promise to her pessimism,

consolation to her sadness. “Future tenses,” said Steiner, “are an idiom of the messianic...every use of the verb *to be* is a negation...of [death]...every use of an ‘if’...tells of the refusal of the brute inevitability of the despotism of the fact. *Shall, will, and if*, circling in intricate fields of semantic force around a hidden center...are the passwords of hope.”

Even so, for a generation, the silence of God was deafening; and despite every effort to sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land, even the weeping of God’s people fell silent too. Adopting the present tense of Babylonian discourse, they neither remembered nor repined, they neither wept nor waited. They existed at the zero point where memory and hope are eclipsed and the present tense is sufficient for the day’s troubles. All flesh, in other words, is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades. The people is grass: creatures who “Maintain themselves by the common routine,/Learn to avoid excessive expectation,/Become tolerant of themselves and others,/Giving and taking in the usual actions/What there is to give and take. They do not repine.” T.S. Eliot. Present tense.

Then into the silence, a voice says: “Cry!” “The divine word piles up imperatives: *comfort/speak/cry/make clear/make straight/preach/get up/do not be afraid/speak.*” [James Limberg] “What shall I cry?” asks the messenger of God, and the syntax of future promise sets in motion the scroll of Second Isaiah. Cry this: “The word of our God will stand forever!” The tense of hope literally explodes before a people whom he believes are headed home: “He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arm and carry them in his bosom.” Mercy and might made visible and present!

Soon with joy, they journey up to Jerusalem, they rebuild the temple, they embrace a new beginning only to fall victim to economic oppression, to political occupation, to religious syncretism and, once again, to the present tense of merely human horizons. This is human destiny (all flesh is grass) unless the God of Israel should enter in, should rule God’s people,

once again, in the person of a king descended from David's line.

“In the sixth month,” Luke tells Theophilus a few hundred years later, “the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, *of the house of David* (can you not hear the hope barely contained in this detail!)” “Behold,” said the angel to Mary, “you *will conceive* in your womb and bear a son (the future tense being an idiom of the messianic), and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

Luke writes this scene after the destruction of the second temple, after the fall of Jerusalem, after the defeat of the Jews that issued in Palestine's expropriation by Rome, after the one they had hoped would redeem Israel had been crucified, dead and buried, after he had been raised and made known to them in the breaking of bread, after he had sent them out as witnesses with God's promise upon them. The ancient hope so tied to the fortunes of one nation and one people is now for all peoples and all times, God's visible presence whom Mary cradles in her womb.

“Future tenses,” I tell you once more, “are an idiom of the messianic...every use of the verb *to be* is a negation...of [death] ...every use of an ‘if’...tells of the refusal of the brute inevitability of the despotism of the fact. *Shall, will, and if*, circling in intricate fields of semantic force around a hidden center...are the passwords of hope.”

What song shall we sing against this present darkness? Sing this: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...for he who is mighty has done great things and holy is his name.” But wait, for the tense of Mary's song has one final surprise: he has shone, has scattered, has put down, has exalted, has filled, has sent. “It is most striking,” writes Fred

Craddock, “the lines that clearly refer to God’s establishing justice and mercy in the future, in the end time, contain past tense verbs, not future tense verbs. Why?” Mary sings in the peculiar past tense (aorist) of the Greek language, proclaiming what is true for all time: “past, present and future without differentiation. So sure is the singer that God will do what is promised that it is proclaimed as an accomplished fact.”

Against the despotism of this present tense, what shall we sing? Conjugators of “to be,” purveyors of “if,” children of the God who has spoken (aorist) once, for all, in a manger and on a cross, let us with Mary magnify him.

This must be why mystics and poets record
the slender incursions of splintered light,
echoes, fragments, odd words and phrases
like flashes through darkened hallways.
These stabs remind me that the proud
And portly old church is really only
that cut green slip grafted into a tiny nick
that merciful God himself slit into the stem
of his chosen Judah. The thin and tenuous thread
we hang by, so astonishing,
is the metaphor I need at the shoreline
of all those immeasurable oceans of love.

“For the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him, from generation to generation.” Thanks be to God!