

Why Do We Need a Savior?: O Come Root of Jesse  
Isaiah 11:1-10  
Luke 2:8-14

“On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples....”

The fields where we abide are exponentially darker on this morning than they were a few days ago. It is a darkness we cannot comprehend, a darkness that has momentarily extinguished the lesser lights by which we live, a darkness that has come too close to home. The parents of Newtown now join the parents of Kabul and Damascus and Gaza and Tel Aviv and Karachi and Darfur and Baghdad and Oaxaca and Angola and Chad and Pyongyang and West Oak Lane and the Badlands, join every parent who dwells in the unrelenting darkness of bullets and bombs, of drugs and disease and death, join all who love their children lost to death no less than we. The fields where we abide, where we tend the young ones, the vulnerable ones and now the sad ones are dark indeed.

The fields where we abide have also fallen silent on this morning, a silence that has quit the mindless holiday music in the mall, the numbingly clever quips on Twitter, the casual exchange of small talk at parties, and the banal religious assurances because, in the face of evil, we have no words. Later there will be things to say about violence and guns, about security in the schools and sensible measures to take in the home. But on this morning, merely human words do not avail. The fields where we abide, where we are trying by ourselves to make sense of ourselves have fallen silent.

The fields where we abide are filled with fear as well, the fear that we cannot secure our children's lives no matter how hard we try, the fear that we cannot secure our own, the fear, says the preacher of Ecclesiastes, that “time and chance happen to us all,” the fear of things we do not know about the next day and the next because the illusion of control has been taken from us. In

the fields where we abide we are afraid for our lives, for our children's lives and for their future as the darkness deepens and the silent night descends.

I think it not by chance that the churches and synagogues of Newtown were filled on Friday night and that these pews are filled this morning. Even if you are not a person who normally spends Sunday morning in a sanctuary, darkness and silence and fear paradoxically turn us, in our vulnerability, to seek a word not our own. "When we reach our limits," writes John Shea, "when our ordered worlds collapse,...we do a distinctively human thing. We gather together and tell stories of God to calm our terror and hold our hope on high." The story for this morning, chosen months ago, speaks of shepherds abiding in the fields around Bethlehem, keeping watch over a vulnerable flock by night. Apart from the sentiment of the season, Luke's story evokes darkness and silence and even fear. His shepherds stand at the end of a long line of shepherds to whom a future has been promised, a future that depends solely on what God would do: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; Moses, Joshua, Samuel, and Jesse's son David, to name a few. The sign of this promise in human history is the existence of a people chosen to wait upon God and to live in the hope that God will do what God has promised.

But by the time we arrive in the fields around Bethlehem where Luke's shepherds abide, the hopes and fears of all the years no longer seem plausible. The land has been lost; the temple in ruins; the people scattered; Israel's shepherds are no more than hirelings. Remember that Luke is writing the beginning of his Gospel after writing most of Luke and all of Acts, after all these things. For Luke's shepherds the future no longer orders the present by hope; nor, says Robert Jenson, is the future "a blank waiting to be filled in by whatever promises someone may bring. It is already occupied by death. And death reinterprets all promises and hopes the same way: 'It might have been.'"

It might have been. It might have been that Israel prevailed against the enemy without and within; it might have been that the future promised came to pass in the little town of Bethlehem. It might have been, as the President struggled to say on Friday, that twenty little children lived to celebrate birthdays, graduations, weddings, and the birth of their own children. It might have been that the innocence of their classmates was preserved and not torn away. But not. “With the matter of death, we can drop the rhetorical questions,” says Jenson. “Nobody will deny that death does inescapably occupy the future; death is the only brute existential fact. We will all have to deal with it, and will spend our lives at the job.” Jens, of course, is not talking about the physical death of an organism but about the death that is the eclipse of the future tense for those with whom and in whom we hope. Likewise the darkness, the silence, the fears of the shepherds in the field where they abide is the human condition absent the promise and so without hope in the world.

Though here is the rub: the promise that infuses the present with hope is not a promise I can make to you or you can make to me because our promises hold only until death parts us—literally or figuratively—one from another. The promise of a future is God’s alone to make. In the birth of a child whose lineage *reaches back* to the promises made to Abraham and Moses and Jesse’s son David, God’s promised future is now “complete, unambiguous and potent.” But equally if not more astonishing is the light the promise shines from out of the future on our destiny: on the kingdom of God’s reign where there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying nor any more pain. To wait for this future is to insistently and actively demand a new heaven and a new earth. But the rub? The promise is in God’s hand.

And another is this: the darkness is necessary. The human condition of those who hear the promise is often described as that of a people dwelling in darkness. Only when the lesser

lights by which you live have been extinguished; when the words that come to mind in the face of death are hopelessly banal; when everything you fear in life renders you helpless, then and only then shall the message of the angels come to you, get through to you, address you saying in so many words “Fear not! God is on his way to you.”

Suddenly the fear of the shepherds is no longer the fear of life in the thrall of death. It is the fear of God coming near--of “the heavens let down.” “It is only here,” said Barth famously, “with all due respect to our fear of life—that it is really worthwhile to be afraid. Here hearts and reins are tried. Here the question is awe and not agitation. Here no one can escape and no one can console himself. Having reached the ultimate limit of all that we fear, where God is revealed to us, we are no longer afraid of this or the next thing, but of [God] alone.”

How can this be? For the God who awaits us in a manger is a weak baby boy, no less vulnerable to death than the twenty little children in Newtown. Yet inconceivably in him, we confess, we have to do with the God who has assumed our vulnerable lives and our terrifying deaths so that death shall have no dominion. In his living and dying and rising, we declare that love and not death is the future we are promised. This is a leap, to be sure, a wager at the edge of an open grave that hope is not interpreted by death, by what might have been, but by the love that knows no end.

Perhaps, as many have said, Christmas should be cancelled this year and we should be sent into these dark nights alone with no word to say, no story to tell ourselves in the silence. Who can be of good cheer? But Christmas is about nothing if it is not about death’s defeat, about the God who comes because he will let neither life nor death nor angels nor principalities nor powers nor height nor depth nor any other creature separate us from his love. As the darkness deepens and the silence overtakes you and you have no help to give yourself on this Christmas

Eve, I pray that the night will be dark enough for you to see, however faint, the light that shines in the darkness; that the night will be silent enough for you to hear the astonishing news of a shepherd come near to accompany you and your children and your children's children in life, and even through the valley of the shadow of death. Fear not! The love that is stronger than death has become flesh in this weak baby boy who is born for you. Thanks be to God!