

When Hope is Elusive

It was a night like this—same moon, same stars, those things don't change much over 2,000 years—but it was on the opposite side of this earth, out in the fields. There were the shepherds watching over their sheep. They lived out there, keeping those sheep safe from predators night and day for sheep are defenseless. They can't fight back, and they just are not going to win any racing contests.

For the shepherds, it was a rough life, little to nothing in the way of creaturely comforts, barely a subsistence living. What were they thinking out there in those fields? Were they content to be out under the starry night or were they lonely, longing for family and loved ones they couldn't embrace or relationships they couldn't forge because of their work in those fields? Did they think about the larger discontent that was brewing around them within their culture? Judea was under the rule of a King who was in the hip pocket of the Roman Empire. He is remembered as a great king—King Herod the Great, and, indeed he managed to pull off an amazingly ambitious building program that was unparalleled in Jewish history. Some say he was brilliant and in terms of material influence and splendor within the culture, he had no equal. And yet, the man was brutal. He was a tyrant and his reign was bloody and paranoid, even by the standards of other monarchies of the day. Opposition of any kind—real or imagined, in his government or in his family—was done away with. An exorbitant taxation system, some scholars believe as much as 50 to 60%, supported his colossal building program causing the majority of the population to struggle under its weight while the very few, like King Herod himself, lived very well indeed. Did the shepherds think about those things? Were they part of the growing discontent within their culture? If so, did it motivate them to feel rebellious?...or did they just feel discouragement and resignation?—once again, the powerful few, stepping on the powerless, people like them.

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And what was Mary thinking? She and Joseph had traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem. That's a distance of around 100 miles. Imagine traveling 100 miles before there were cars, buses, trains, or airplanes. The image we have is of Mary riding on a donkey with Joseph walking beside her. She was nine months pregnant. Can we even imagine the exhaustion she must have felt? And then when they finally reached Bethlehem, there were crowds of people who had converged on that town, all there by order of a decree that all must be registered in the town from which they were descended. Where would they stay? There were no rooms. Every place was filled with people. They were offered a stable. That's a barn. After a long, exhausting trip with a baby pushing to be born, she was going to spend the night on the floor of a barn. I wonder if tears stung her eyes.

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Who can blame the shepherds? Who can blame Mary and Joseph?...if they struggled to find even a shred of hope to hold onto...except, that there was a promise. A promise made to Mary when she first learned that she was pregnant—not a pregnancy expected or even possible. A

promise that began with an angel's assurance, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.' Did she remember that promise that night, even perhaps as tears of exhaustion fell down her cheeks? Did she remember that reassurance as she endured that grueling trip and then was given a bed of hay on which to spend the night in a barn? Yet, there was that swollen belly and inside a life kicking and moving preparing to appear. She had that promise within her and within it hope.

For what is hope? I suggest to you that hope in its most powerful manifestation is love. Love that exists and persists despite the ugliness to which humanity can descend, despite the greed and selfishness, despite the grasping for power that is willing to watch children starve to skin and bones as in Yemen or to let the earth belch with polluted sickness for the sake of money that can be extracted from it. It is love that safeguards and restores hope.

How brilliant of God to send that hope to us in the form of an infant—a tiny, innocent, amazing miracle that is completely and utterly dependent upon love for its survival. How brilliant of God to send Jesus in this form that requires total and complete love, love that sweeps us off our feet with wonder and awe.

And the shepherds, those lowly and perhaps lonely caregivers in those fields, were going to be the first to receive word of that hope come into this world. An angel appeared to them that night and began with the same words of assurance first given to Mary when she received the news that hope had been placed within her, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people." A child is born. Our hearts soften with love at the sight of an infant. Hope incarnate has entered the world.

Fast forward to 1818, exactly 200 years ago in a small village in Austria where there stands the church of St. Nicholas. That Christmas Eve afternoon it was discovered that the organ would not play. No matter how much the pedals were pumped, only a scratchy wheeze came out of the aged instrument. There was no hope of any organ repair specialist being able to make it to that church until Christmas was long over. To the 26 year old curate of that congregation, Christmas without music was unthinkable. Faced with a Christmas crisis and being musical himself, Father Joseph Mohr realized that the only music that evening would need to be led by him on his guitar. But, he also realized that the traditional Christmas carols would not sound right on his stringed instrument, so he decided something new was needed. Two years earlier, he had written a poem—a poem he intentionally wrote in German, the language of the people rather than in Latin, the more traditional language of the church but which few understood. It was a poem written during a bleak time in history. Decades of war (Napoleonic Wars) and French occupation had left the people hungry and impoverished. In his poem, Fr. Mohr tapped into the deep longing of the people for peace and hope. He showed the poem to the church's organist, Franz Xaver Gruber, and asked him to write—that very afternoon—music appropriate for guitar to express that poem. I think few of us would dispute that the Holy Spirit took hold of Gruber that afternoon, and the result was "Silent Night" sung for the first time 200 years ago this night at that evening's Christmas Eve service—six stanzas of which we have three in English. Today that carol has earned a place on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list because it has touched so many people from so many countries as a symbol of peace and unity.

Almost 100 years after that, four years shy of the 100th anniversary of "Silent Night," nationalism was on the rise, and soldiers were fighting WWI along the Western Front. The war had been raging only five months and already more than a million soldiers had been killed or

wounded. But on Christmas Eve, 1914, a hush had fallen over the trenches as night fell. A voice arose from the darkness, ... *Silent Night, Holy Night*..., and then another voice and then another voice. Soon, voices could be heard singing from both sides, each in their own language. An eyewitness, Frank Richards, wrote in his diary, "We stuck up a board with 'Merry Christmas' on it. The enemy stuck up a similar one. Two of our men threw their equipment off and jumped on the parapet with their hands above their heads as two of the Germans did the same, our two going to meet them. They shook hands and then we all got out of the trench and so did the Germans." That began a truce that extended into Christmas Day with the exchange of small gifts and stories, the playing of games, and the singing of Christmas carols—together.

Sadly, even though, Richards' wrote, there were German soldiers who spoke English perfectly and they shared with one another how fed up they were with the war and how glad they would be when it was over, when Christmas Day had ended, they took up their arms again. The forces behind the war were too far advanced for a Christmas carol to overturn them. And yet, the love of God incarnate within an infant, broke through that night and provided a glimpse of hope, hope for a world defined not by "enemies" or "friends," "my people" or "your people," "us" or "them," but by love and compassion and concern for all people, all of us made in the image of God.

Several decades later, the world was in another war—WWII, and pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was in prison for opposing Hitler. It was the Christmas before his execution and he and his fiancée, Maria, were exchanging letters. She wrote to him in his jail cell:

"I think we're going to have an exceptionally good Christmas. The very fact that every outward circumstance precludes our making provision for it will show whether we can be content with what is truly essential. I used to be very fond of thinking up and buying presents, but now that we have nothing to give, the gift God gave us in the birth of Christ will seem all the more glorious;... The poorer our quarters, the more clearly we receive that our hearts should be Christ's home on earth." Letter to fiancée Maria von Wedemeyer, 12/1/1943

And Dietrich wrote back to her:

"Be brave for my sake, dearest Maria, even if this letter is your only token of my love this Christmas-tide. ... when everything is bearing down on us to such an extent that we can scarcely withstand it, the Christmas message comes to tell us that all our ideas are wrong, and that what we take to be evil and dark is really good and light because it comes from God. Our eyes are at fault, that is all. God is in the manger, wealth in poverty, light in darkness, succor in abandonment. No evil can befall us; whatever men may do to us, they cannot but serve the God who is secretly revealed as love and rules the world and our lives." Letter to fiancée Maria von Wedemeyer from prison, 12/13/1943

When Hope is Elusive... love enters the world—the love of God for us that has been tenacious throughout history, calling us to return to God's powerful and eternal embrace of love when we have drifted away. Love that we are commanded to extend to one another. Love that we know, when we receive it, changes our hearts and fills us with hope—hope that enables us to face whatever life throws at us. "Fear not for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people." A child is born. Our hearts soften with love at the sight of the infant. Hope incarnate has entered the world. AMEN.