

Redemption

“It’s not a diversion.”

Luke 1:67-79

Second in the Advent series, “Wishin’ and Hopin’”

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Diversions

Laura and I had just been to Albion College to attend a Festival of Lessons and Carols in which he sang. We merged onto eastbound I-94 and, as I picked up speed, Laura eyed the fuel gauge from a side-long view (the way spouses do when riding in the passenger’s seat). “Do we have enough gas to get home?” she asked. “Sure!” We *had* a quarter of a tank. We did make it home; in fact, we still had about an eighth of a tank left. “I’ll have to stop at a station before going to Ann Arbor in the morning,” I thought.

‘Next morning, I pushed the clock a little bit, jumped in the car and made off for my meeting, looking down at the gauge again only after I was half-way down the road. “Oh well,” I thought, “I’ve got enough to get there; shouldn’t take the time, now. I’ll stop on the way back.”

It was a long meeting. The sun was setting as I left the city to make my way home. I called Laura to tell her I’d be late and pressed for time to get to my evening meetings. I merged onto M-14, accelerated to highway speed, passing the distinct architecture at the US-23 interchange where city meets country. That was when my attention was drawn to the sudden flash of a red warning light that ignited next to the gas gauge. “I think that means two gallons left,” I thought. “Two times 24 are 48 miles. Plenty to get home...I think.”

But I wasn’t absolutely certain. So when I saw a road sign for a service station at Ford Road, I thought, “I might as well be safe.” I pulled off, turning right, went a stretch up the road, and saw nothing in the now, thickening dark. I came to the intersection and, thinking I saw a symbol and arrow on a dull, slightly reflective sign pointing the way I turned right, leading back toward Ann Arbor. I went a couple of miles and saw nothing. “This is silly,” I said out loud. I turned the car around, crossed Ford Road and continued east-northeast because, I reasoned, it would be better to run out of gas on a slower road, no matter how remote. And maybe more likely to find a station sooner.

The truth was, I was running on fumes, almost out of gas. I needed a sign and there was no sign in this darkness. No sign at all.

The Gift of a Sign

There are moments, when trouble comes and all hope is spent and help seems not to be on the way, when one needs a sign. A sign of some sort would serve as encouragement, substantiate faith, bolster courage, and dare you to hang on.

The other day the news was less-than-cheery. It was reported that Detroit's unemployment level is at 30% while Pontiac's is at 35%. The President is calling up more troops for the War in Afghanistan, saying that our armed forces are scheduled to begin leaving in 2011, nine years after we arrived. We got two notices from credit card companies that they were raising APR rates to 24.99%. A group of people huddled, warming themselves with soup in our stairwell. I heard that over 14% of American households something like 49 million people currently do not have enough food to put on the table.¹ CBS had just aired a disturbing documentary on 60 minutes, reporting the bloodshed and violence done to millions of people in Congo, which sale of smuggled gold and metals we find in our cell phones is helping to fund.²

Then I was sitting in a meeting with my laptop on for taking notes while we were talking about budget cuts and the prospect of reducing staff. I was engaged in the conversation. And it was not comfortable.

But I looked at my computer screen and saw the random appearance of my photo cache running off my screen-saver. A scene from the Indian Ocean coastline in South Africa; a view from a North Cascade summit I had climbed; ancient dwellings on a cliff-side in New Mexico; a family gathering shot from some Thanksgiving: each pulling me into a different world where, in contrast to the anxiety and sadness of the day, there was joy and awe and things seemed *right*.

I thought, "These pictures are signs."

Or were they? Were they really signs that things will be better in this world and even in our church, or were they just, on this occasion, *distractions*?

Now in the face of unemployment and poverty, we see burning lights all around – strings of them; lit plastic Santa's; illumined crèche scenes, display windows; all with the

air with joy. And it *is* joy for many; yet, not for all. In some ways, can the signs we make to bring us joy and good feelings also serve to distract from the truth that even though there is Christmas happiness there is at the same time also injustice and oppression in the world, hide it or not?

Make all the signs you want. Or, put up with driving in the dark. In the end, neither approach is going to help. Bottom line: we need God's sign.

So did Zechariah. The old man whose personal sadness hinged on a lifetime without children also lived in a time of suffering and oppression. The rich around him made their profits on the misfortune of the poor. His people were terrorized by hard times and foreign bullies. He lived amidst people whose discouragement prompted mean selfishness and sin. Sound familiar?

And I get the feeling that he had learned to accept his disappointment like it was inevitable. I get the feeling they all did. These were simply things for them to complain about in the barbershop chair; but not things that they would ever expect to *really change*. I get the feeling that what they needed was not another sentimental story to tell. They needed a Savior of consequence.

They needed to know that God was going to do something about this. So Zechariah when Zechariah had his vision and was told he was to have a son, who could blame him for not believing? Who'd expect that this world would ever change from its inclination to disappoint?

Food on the table? Freedom from oppression? Peace? Justice? Love?

To what extent do you expect these things when you pass by a house that's covered with colored lights and dancing angels?

Yet, consequence to the world: Peace, justice, love; are exactly what Christmas means. In no way is it a distraction. In Jesus to be born and John who goes before him, that is exactly what God has in mind.

Now Zechariah knows. And though his disbelief had resulted in his 9 month loss of voice, he breaks his silence now with a Spirit-filled song of prophecy.

The births are of consequence. In Jesus and John who goes before him: the world shall be set free.

When a Child is Born

So, I drove through the darkness, riding on fumes. Miles passed. There was nothing until a light came into view. "Beck Rd.," the sign read. I hung a left and drove until the brightness of a service station pierced the darkness with an imposing light. I coasted to the pump, and proceeded to put 15.45 gallons in a 15 gallon tank. The bright light of a service station: in the end, that was the only sign that would do.

You've got your sign. For whatever the need is that haunts you, the real sign is the same. Finally, it doesn't come through the sounds or the sights we use to celebrate the season. They become important only after we have understood the sign. Our sign is curiously similar to the sign promised long ago. "Fear not," says the angel, "for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." This is your sign; and hope for the world is sure as his birth.

¹ "USDA: 14% of American households don't have enough food", *Star-Telegram* (Fort Worth, TX) website, November 16, 2009. <http://www.star-telegram.com/238/story/1767226.html>

² How Gold Pays For Congo's Deadly War 60 Minutes: Killing Continues In The Deadliest War Since WWII As Gold And Other Minerals Pay For Weapons. Aired Sunday, November 29, 2009. <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2009/11/25/60minutes/main5774127.shtml>

