

### **Luke 1:68-79**

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." (*See also Malachi 3:1-4*)

### **“Heads Up!”**

Heads up! Usually when someone yells this phrase we look to the sky to see if we are about to be hit by a flying object. Is a baseball, football or hockey puck hurling towards us? We turn toward the sound of the warning and yet we also freeze, not knowing which way to turn or what to do. In a split second our minds anticipate being struck and our hearts are pounding, pulses racing.

Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, knew a thing or two about heart pounding anticipation. He was visited by the Angel Gabriel while serving his turn as priest in the temple. Gabriel appeared to him and told him that he and his elderly barren wife, Elizabeth, would have a son that they were to name John, who would “make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” Zechariah froze. Unable to grasp his place in God’s “head’s up,” unable to take all the news in, he said to Gabriel, “How will I know that it is so?” Unlike a heads up to look out for a stray ball, God’s heads up, God’s call out to us, God’s look here and pay attention, is intended to call us to prepare the way for God’s reign.

So the angel struck Zechariah mute. It doesn’t seem fair, he just asked a question! Zechariah was unable to speak until the day of his son’s birth. When Elizabeth bore their son, the neighbors wanted to name him Zachariah Jr. Elizabeth said his name was to be John. They didn’t believe her so they questioned Zachariah and he wrote, “His name is John.” That moment he regained his speech. The man who had only been able to question Gabriel now sang the message he couldn’t understand a year before! Filled with the Spirit he sang of his son, “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” Zechariah prophesied what Gabriel proclaimed and from his own experience, he knew the darkness of the shadow of death. He, a priest of the temple, had been unable to accept the God’s news of the child he and Elizabeth had always longed for. Now his son would cry out to all people “prepare the way for the Lord.” John proclaimed that we must live new lives because the dawn from on high has broken upon us in Jesus Christ. The Most High has come to give knowledge of salvation, forgiveness, mercy, light and peace.

Erin Dunigan, one of my friends from Seminary, included me in a group email this fall. "I am here in the West Bank and Israel as part of [an international and ecumenical conference, representing many continents and all major branches of the church including Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and many flavors of Protestantism]. We are meeting with a group called Sabeel who work with Palestinian Christians (yes, there is such a group) specifically in issues of suffering, justice and peace [in this region]. Today we visited Bethlehem. At the risk of ruining a favorite Christmas carol, the phrase 'how still we see thee lie' is...true today. .... Bethlehem is a Palestinian community, about 75% Muslim and 25% Christian. It is now surrounded by the Separation Wall. The people of Bethlehem cannot leave the town without a permit, which is very difficult for them to obtain. Bethlehem is about 10 minutes from Jerusalem and has traditionally been a suburb of it, with its residents working in Jerusalem. Its other economic livelihood has been tourism. Both have come to a near standstill due to the Wall. As I saw the Wall and heard stories from Palestinian Christian leaders about the plight of their people, I struggled as to how I could possibly communicate the direness of the whole situation to you. .... At the least, I would hope that if you find yourself singing 'O Little Town of Bethlehem' this year, you would remember to pray for the people of Bethlehem and the struggle of all those in Palestine and in Israel who are seeking peace."

Erin said she was finding herself "less and less 'neutral' on the situation. There are definitely two sides to the conflict here, but I would say that the two sides are NOT Israeli and Palestinian, but those who are seeking peace and those who are resorting to violence." Her email ended "Peace, Salaam (Arabic), Shalom (Hebrew)."

Like Zachariah and Erin, we must envision and hope for a different future beyond the limits of what we now see. We are not waiting for the dawn to break as Zachariah was in the beginning of his story; the dawn from on high has already broken upon the world! Our heads must be up in order to see the dawn, the light that has emerged to guide our feet in the way of peace. Zachariah's song calls us out of reactionary stances to the darkness of our lives and the shadow of death. We live and move and have our being through hope in the way of Christ, which frees us to serve God without fear and to live in peace, now and to the completion of God's salvation plan.

Sister Karen Klimczak's life shows us the dawn from on high, and that the light breaks upon those who sit in darkness. "While eulogizing Sister Karen -- who was killed on Good Friday, allegedly by a parolee living in the halfway house she founded and ran for almost two decades -- Father Roy Herberger asked not for vengeance or even justice, but mercy. "If there was one word synonymous with Sister Karen, it would be 'forgive'. And she would be the first one to say that about Craig (the man who murdered her) -- 'Father, forgive him for he doesn't know what he's doing, because of the crack cocaine.'" ... "There have been talk shows on the radio filled with bitterness and hatred," Father Herberger said during his eulogy. "That's totally a contrast to what Karen's life was about."

"...White paper doves, hand-printed with..., 'I leave peaceprints,' decorated the church and overflow tent. Karen's sister, who is also a nun, talked about those words while sitting in the kitchen of Bissonette House ... less than 18 hours after Sister Karen's body was found. "She said to me, 'You leave your fingerprints on everything. We need to be people who leave imprints of peace wherever we go.... That's what she was about and that is what she challenged others to do.'" Karen created the phrase "I leave peaceprints"

before her death and wanted to unveil the words as a project in the future. Her funeral turned out to be the place she was looking for, the place where her idea for peaceprints was unveiled.”

“Karen’s memorial service included young and old. Black, white, Hispanic and Asian. Men and women. Corn-rows and crew-cuts. A middle-aged white man in a monk's robe and a young black man in a Los Angeles Lakers jacket worked their way through the crowd in the tent, lighting small candles held by mourners. More than a thousand voices opened the Mass by singing "How Great Thou Art," and ended it with what had to be one of the longest "Peace be with you" handshake-and-hug sessions in religious history.”<sup>1</sup>

The dawn from on high has broken and will continue to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. Jesus guides our feet in the way of peace.

Heads up! “Your Redeemer is, even now, drawing near.”<sup>2</sup> Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Sister Karen’s Hopeful Legacy Lives On, by David Staba, *Niagara Falls Reporter*, April 25, 2006. Used with changes, editing and omitting parts.

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Joanna M. Adams for this very last line and for the “Heads Up” concept which she used in a different context, that I used throughout this sermon. Living the Word “Change Agent” in *the Christian Century*, November 29, 2006.