

Living the Promises

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Isaiah 9:2-7

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;....”

Christmas Eve

NOTE: The meditation is based not only on Isaiah 9:2-7, but also uses the final narrator’s selection from W.H. Auden’s *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*

Movement 1 – The Thrill of Tonight

The night is here. The hush of excitement blankets over us all. The stillness of anticipation fills us, moves us and encourages into the dark of night. The darkness of the night brings hope of the light of tomorrow. The stars shine, and the darkness does not seem so dark. The lights are lit and the cold does not seem so oppressive. The night is here and we know something, somewhere is happening. The night is here.

The night has been foretold for weeks, for months, for years, and for generations. From the prophets in the scriptures to the prophets on the television screen we have been told of this night. We have been told of this night when, if just for a moment, we put things aside and sit and listen. We have been told of this night when, if just for a fleeting thought we stop and look around and observe the world in which we live. We have been told of this night when the schedules are changed, when commitments are kept and when people are brought together. We have been told of this night. The night is here.

The night is here and we are to shout out “joy.” The night is here and we are to proclaim “glory.” The night is here and we are to dance, sing, and be full of cheer. The night is here when what the prophet Isaiah proclaimed has come to pass. We remember. We remember the birth that happened on this night. We remember and we celebrate the joy of that birth. We remember and we celebrate that we have a Wonderful Counselor, a Might God, an Everlasting Father, and a Prince of Peace. Christ is born! The night is here.

We are ready to exchange the pleasantries of “Merry Christmas”; we are ready to exchange the cookies, the drinks, the cheer and... the presents. We are ready to live into the joy, to declare the hope, and to live into the promise of Christ. The night is here, the table is set, the stable is prepared, the animals are in their place, the children have been sent to bed, and we are ready for the coming of our Lord. The night is here.

The night is here and the light shines. We have been walking in the darkness for so long. We have been searching, and hoping and waiting for so long. We have been held down by our own despair, by our doubts, by our wondering if we would indeed be accepted by our Lord. The darkness of our doubts, the darkness of our fear, the darkness of our sin has held us down, has yoked us and burdened for so long, and now finally in this night the darkness will be swept away. Now, finally in this night of all nights the darkness will not shine. We have walked in darkness and now see a great light. We have been walking in hopelessness and now embrace a great hope. We have been walking in despair and now see a love that sets us free. In this night the light shines for us all.

The night is here. The profound, still, exciting and awesome night of hope and grace is here. It is a night of joy, of anticipation and of thrill. The night is here.

Movement 2 – The Ho-Hum of Tomorrow

Yet tomorrow will come. Not the literal tomorrow. The tomorrow of opening presents begins tonight. The tomorrow of celebration begins tonight. The tomorrow of hope, of the Prince of Peace, of the justice through the throne of David begins tonight. With excitement we already enter into that day. With a constant look at the clock, with a constant wondering what is in the nicely and pretty wrapped boxes we enter into the time of tonight. That tomorrow is here. That tomorrow is now. That time is now. Yet the tomorrow of empty boxes will soon be here. The tomorrow of tired parents and children contently playing with new sources of adventure, imagination and excitement will soon be here. The tomorrow of leftovers, of chores to put away stars and the sparkle of today will soon come upon us. Tomorrow will come.

Auden captures this tomorrow in his concluding lines from his Oratorio. He speaks of dismantling the tree, putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes... going back to school and taking care of leftovers. He speaks of returning to life, to returning to scrubbing the kitchen table, to paying bills, to learning verbs and living in the time of tomorrow.

That tomorrow is coming; it is around the corner and will soon be here. It is not long before the empty boxes oppress us with the reminder that life continues. It is not long before the stacks of dirty dishes remind us of the life that continues. The darkness that we leave today returns in the tomorrow after Christmas. The hope that we celebrate today seems to only last until the tomorrow after Christmas. The exhaustion will settle in and tomorrow will come.

Movement 3 – The Movement of Time

Time moves. Time moves on. Time moves on and we cannot keep it, stop it or control it. Time moves on.

This is the reality of life. This is what we face and what we must embrace, that time moves on. Christmas is here, and will soon be over and “already the mind begins to be vaguely aware of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought of Lent and Good Friday which cannot, after all, now be very far off.” Time continues and we are caught in the stream, in the river moving helplessly and hopelessly in the currents of time.

Isaiah spoke to a people who were waiting for time to move on. Isaiah was speaking to a people who were waiting for this king, for this Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace. The people were waiting for the day when all the instruments of death and destruction, the boots of tramping warriors and the garments stained in blood would be burned. The people were waiting to throw off the yoke on their shoulders, and were waiting to come into the light. The people were waiting for the coming, for the savior, for Christmas. But the time has come and the time will go. The hope is here, but will it remain tomorrow? The light shines but will it continue to shine tomorrow? The promise of peace is alive in our hearts, but will that promise live tomorrow? We have been to Christmas again, and time takes us away from Christmas. Time takes us on the other side of Isaiah, on the other side of hope waiting and wondering what to do with this time. The time being is constantly changing, and is constantly demanding that we become engaged in one way or another.

“The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all. For the innocent children who whispered so excitedly outside the locked door where they knew the presents to be grew up when it opened. Now, recollecting that moment we can repress the joy, but the guilt remains conscious;...”

Time continues and we can feel the darkness creeping back into our lives. Time continues and the hope and the promise of Christmas, the hope and the promise that we have been waiting for so long, the hope and the promise that we have needed for so long moves on and we return to the mundane of life, the trying of life and the difficulties of life. What can we do with this joy when we know that in but a few days we will be packing it away with the ornaments and boxes? What do we do with this promise when in a few days it will fade in our memories as we return to the struggles of life? What do we do with this excitement and anticipation when we know that a year is too long to wait and yesterday is nothing to anticipate? Time continues and it feels as if Christmas will soon pass, the lights will cease to shine (except for the few stubborn and lazy homeowners). Christmas will pass and the joy will subside. The challenges of life will return. The difficulties of life will return. Time moves on.

Movement 4 – Living this Time into Tomorrow

Yet we have now. We have the “Time Being, we have here and now. We have the promise right now. We have the hope right now. We have Christ right now.

Christmas is now, and the light shines. Christ is born on this night and hope comes into the world. This time is given to us as the most precious gift from God. This time is handed to us gently and graciously and we are to take it. We are to take this time and to live it. We are to take this time and to live it and embrace it. We are to take this time and to live it, and embrace it, and let it become the time of our life. “The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all,” except for now. For this time being is the time of the birth of our Lord. This time being is the time of a people who walked in darkness seeing a great light. This time being is a time of joy in the nations, of harvest and of the yoke of our burdens broken. This time being, this now is the gift given to us on this Christmas night.

What can we do but hold onto such a time into tomorrow. What can we do but not let it slip away into the recesses of our memory and our experience. What can we do but live the time of now into the time of tomorrow. The *chronos*, the time that marches on, the time that is relentless and unforgiving will threaten our hope. The *chronos*, the time of the now, the “Time Being” that is constantly moving and changing will demand that we leave the hope of tonight with the ornaments and the wrapping paper and the leftovers and the empty boxes and exhaustion of the day. The *chronos*, the time of the now will continue to march and pull us back into the darkness, back into the wondering, back into the questioning of our salvation, back into the doubts of our freedom.

But tonight we enter into a different time. Tonight we enter into the *kairos*, the Lord’s time. This is the time that was around before when God set the world in motion. This is the time that ebbs and flows with the will and wishes of the Lord. This is a time that we hinted at with the prophets, a time that was spoken of by John the Baptist, but that started with the birth of our Lord. The promises of the prophet, the hopes and dreams of Isaiah are real in God’s *kairos*. The kingdom is only seen and experienced in God’s *kairos*. Tonight we are in God’s time; tonight we are living in the *kairos*. This time is not

fleeting but growing. This time does not pass but only increases. This time, this hope, this joy is a time in which we can live and continue to live into the tomorrow. The light shines in God's *kairos*, continue to live that time into tomorrow. The yoke is broken and we are forgiven in God's *kairos*, carry that freedom with you into tomorrow. The hope of the world is found now, in God's *kairos*, live that hope into tomorrow. Stay in the *kairos* of this night. Stay in the hope of this night, even as tomorrow comes. Even as the time being shifts from now to then, the time we are in can say and continue. Live this time into tomorrow.

Movement 5 – Living into the Promise

What do we do with this gift, with this birth that enters so softly and so profoundly into our lives? What do we do with this child that is born, this child that brings so much hope and so much promise. What do we do with this confluence of *chronos and kairos*? Not today, but tomorrow, and the next and the next. "The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all." The guilt of our sin will encroach us. The sorrow of our brokenness will overtake us and we will forget the promises.

Take the time of now, and bring it into the time of tomorrow. Make tomorrow today. Make next week today. The Time Being is now, and can continue to be now. The time being is this night and can continue to be this night. Live with the hope that God's time is now. Live with the promise that God's freedom is here. Live with the assurance that God's grace prevails through this time into tomorrow and all of the time being. The Time Being need not be difficult but can indeed be God's time. The time being need not be oppressive but hold the promise that justice and righteousness will reign. The time being need not be full of the hopelessness of the darkness of the world, but full of the zeal of the Lord. We have seen a great live, live into that light, live into that promise, live into that time. The time being is God's time, a promise of hope and an assurance of peace. Carry the hope of the birth of Christ into the time being of today, tomorrow and all the days to come.

AMEN