

## "Surprise Us With Love at Daybreak"

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*<sup>68</sup>"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.*

*<sup>69</sup>He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, <sup>70</sup>as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, <sup>71</sup>that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.*

*<sup>72</sup>Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, <sup>73</sup>the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us <sup>74</sup>that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, <sup>75</sup>in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.*

*<sup>76</sup>And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, <sup>77</sup>to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. <sup>78</sup>By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, <sup>79</sup>to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." (Luke 1:68-79)*

This past July I was invited to preach down in North Carolina at the Village Chapel on Bald Head Island. The island juts out into the Atlantic at the mouth of the Cape Fear River, and about three-quarters of its coastline looks out into the unbounded ocean. Early on Saturday morning, we set an early alarm and hopped into golf cart for the short drive over to the easternmost point on the island. We were not the only people who had made a special effort to get there before 6:13 a.m., the predicted time for the sun to break the horizon over Bald Head Island on July 17, 2021.

I was surprised, actually, by how much light was already visible. We had no trouble seeing the path, the dunes, the beach and the calm water. For a moment I wondered if we had missed it – if the sun might already be up and hiding behind one of the wispy grey clouds hanging over the horizon. But then, way out over the smooth water, the sky began to turn a deeper shade of orange in one spot. Soon the bright top edge of the sun began to peek over the horizon. Slowly and steadily, more and more of the yellow orb came into view. The clouds above began to gleam with hues of blue and purple, while the sky between them went from the faintest yellow, to marigold, tangerine, and, finally, a fiery orange. Through it all, the only sound we could hear was the gentle lapping of the waves on the beach, and the gentle song of a few shorebirds flying in the distance.

I will admit that it had taken more than a little effort for us to get up for this. I think our teenage children would agree that it would have been much easier for us to stay in bed and sleep in. The snooze button looked really appealing that morning. Even as we stood waiting on the beach, we were tired, maybe even a little grumpy, without my first cup of coffee. But all of that was largely forgotten as we watched the miraculous rise of the light, the literal beginning of a brand new day.

I think of that as I read both of the scripture passages we have heard this morning. In both, the world is still cloaked in darkness. In the Luke passage, Zechariah speaks about the dawn as something that has not yet come. The light has not yet broken upon the people – people, he says, “who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.” At this point, the hope of the prophets remains just that – only a hope that, “*by the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon[God’s people].*”

In the same way, the psalmist of Psalm 90 seems to wait in discomfort, hoping that God would do something. People feel like they are drying up, turning back into the dust from whence they came. They feel like they are being swept away like dry, faded, and withered grass. As God looks upon them, they feel more anger than pleasure, more wrath than loving kindness. They are sighing



like an old man about to die, his fleeting breath about to fail after a lifetime of toil and trouble. *"How long?"* the psalmist cries. *"How long do we have to wait? How long before you start treating your people with kindness again?"*

Now, imagine how it would be if this went on for a while... if it went on for years... or if it went on for generations. I think about how easy it is for us to get frustrated when we encounter repeated disappointments. Most of us know people who have become jaded about relationships – perhaps because a cherished one turned sour, or someone they trusted let them down. Or perhaps they felt like they were wandering around in the dark, waiting so long for something good to come along, but it never does. They have sat in the darkness with hope and anticipation, constantly watching the horizon for something new and good to dawn, but it never does. And eventually, they just quit looking for the sun to come up.

As I said, it was pretty hard for us to get up to go see the sunrise over Bald Head that summer. It was hard, but we had an advantage. We knew the sun was coming up. And not only that, we knew exactly when it would be coming up. It was right there on the chart: July 17<sup>th</sup>/Bald Head Island, NC/Sunrise at 6:13 A.M. Eastern Daylight Time. But imagine if we had gotten up every day that week wanting to see the dawn, not knowing if it would come. Rousing ourselves out of bed in the hope of a sighting that day after day, week after week, month after month never came -- we would probably quit looking. Like a castaway on a deserted island who watches the horizon hoping against hope that rescue might come, but going day after day without sighting a plane, or a boat, or even a plume of steam on the horizon. At some point most of us would get jaded, feel helpless, hopeless, cynical that help would ever come.

Stephen Colbert is a funny guy but he is also a faithful and thoughtful guy. Raised in a solid Catholic family, he still goes home to Charleston every Christmas to attend mass at the church of his youth with his family. In many ways, he sees the world through the eyes of his faith. In one of his more serious moments, Colbert said this:

"Cynicism masquerades as wisdom, but it is the farthest thing from it... because cynics don't learn anything... because cynicism is a self-imposed blindness, a rejection of the world because we are afraid it will hurt us or disappoint us."<sup>1</sup>

The point that I hope we will see – both from the faithful prophecy of Zechariah in Luke 1, and the tenacious faith of the psalmist in Psalm 90, is that neither of them got to that point. They both had good reason to be jaded and cynical. They both had good reason to be afraid or how the world can hurt us or disappoint us. Heck, Zechariah and Elizabeth had been hoping for a child for years, looking forward to the day when they might be parents, but they had been disappointed again and again and again. Then, when an angel shows up to tell him he was about to be a dad, he gets struck dumb on the spot because he had the audacity to wonder aloud if that might really happen. But then it really did happen, and Zechariah found hope that he thought he had lost a long time ago. And the birth of his son made it possible for him to dare to trust that something even greater was coming. In that moment, his tongue was loosed and he spoke the hope that gives shape to the entire gospel: the hope that *"the dawn from on high"* was about to break upon the world, *"to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."*

In the same way, the psalmist found a way to cling to hope that for most would have been squelched and squashed a long, long time ago. He is a realist. He knows the people have been waiting. He knows the people have come to expect the worst... that kindness from God was the last

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/cynicism>

thing they were expecting, but the idealism was not completely extinguished. And I love the way Eugene Peterson translates the Hebrew at the highest point in the psalm. "*Surprise us,*" the psalmist cries out to God. "*Surprise us with love at daybreak.*"

That, I would say, is the essence of Advent hope – the idea that, after all they had been through, these faithful believers of old were still willing to rouse themselves in the darkness... still willing to drag themselves down to the beach in the gloom of early morning... still refusing to let go of the possibility that the God they needed to be good and faithful was indeed good and faithful... and that things would look up... that the dawn they needed to see would finally break the horizon... and lives that had been grey would suddenly be lit with a vibrant spectrum of yellows, oranges, and glowing reds.

Advent faith clings to the hope that God really is doing something in the world... and really doing something in us... something good... something miraculous... something worth the wait. This Advent, as people of faith, let's hold fast to the hope that the dawn is coming... in just a little while, it is coming. So let's leave room for God to surprise us... surprise us with love at daybreak.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. ***Amen.***