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The Sound of Hope

Jeremiah 33:14

Advent is a time of preparation. It is the season when we prepare ourselves for God to break into our lives in new and unexpected ways. Duke Ellington once said, “There are two types of music—good and bad—and you can tell them apart by listening.” Advent is a time to tune our ears to the good music of the gospel.

In the 21st chapter of Luke the gospel writer challenges his people to engage in this listening process. Luke is writing a decade or so after the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple by the Romans in AD 70. There are some who see this event as proof that God has given up on the human race. It is a sign that the end of the world is near. Luke urges his readers to reject this message of despair and cynicism. He wants them to listen in the darkness for the music which others do not hear. What happened to Jerusalem was certainly a tragedy. But it was much more than that. It is also a sign that God is at work in history in a new way to bring humanity to a deeper level of wholeness. It is the music of the gospel which conveys that message.

Patrick Wilson describes the experience of hearing that music as he was making a flight connection at the airport in Detroit. He arrived around noon. Knowing that there would be no food on the next flight he realized that he needed to find something to eat on the concourse. The only place to eat in that area was the Burger King. So he took a position at the end of a line that was long but seemed to be moving.

As Wilson moved closer to the counter it became obvious to him that three Asian gentleman in front of him could not speak English. They tried to place their order as two bright twenty-ish young people worked with them with amazing patience. They listened. They tried to repeat the order. They pointed to pictures on the big electronic menu. They nodded their heads. It took some time. The man behind Wilson lost his patience and cried out, “Oh for God’s sake!” One of the young men taking orders looked up with a smile and said, “We’ll get your order in a minute sir! Don’t you worry; we’ll get you to your flight on time.” The two young men went back to listening, smiling, and encouraging the three Asian visitors. Wilson later observed that you can pay a lot of money in a very high class restaurant without receiving that level of hospitality (*Journal for Preachers*, Volume XXX, Number 1, pages 26-37).

Luke invites his readers listen for the music of the gospel which breaks into our lives like that. God’s hospitality runs deeper than we ever dreamed. We do not live at the mercy of the darkness that surrounds us.

Kathleen Bostrom has described an experience that taught her to listen in the darkness of her existence. She was in the hospital where she was having a difficult time recovering from surgery. She found herself assaulted by the sounds of medical equipment, cries of pain by other patients, and loud conversations of visitors who did not understand the patients’ need for rest. She writes:

One night as I lay in my hospital bed, hooked up to so many machines I couldn't move without help and close to tears from the pain and the frustration, I heard a faint sound. Amidst the cries of pain, blaring TVs, and beeping monitors, I swore I heard a different type of sound altogether: a soft, sweet, gentle song. Then it was gone. Was I imagining things? That was entirely possible with all the medications coursing through my veins.

A few hours later, still awake and trying to block out the sounds of the woman wailing across the hall and the loud, angry voice of my roommate swearing on the telephone, I heard the strange, beautiful sound again. Could it possibly be? No, I must be hearing things.

When the nurse came in to check my vitals, I asked her: was it me? Or was there indeed a very different sound breaking through the harshness of that place?

'Oh,' she said, as she wrapped the blood-pressure cuff around my bruised arm. 'It's a tradition here. Every time a baby is born in the nursery, they play Brahms' lullaby on the loudspeakers.'

And right then, for the first time since I had come through the emergency room of that hospital, I smiled, albeit weakly.

I felt hopeful.

I felt peace.

During the remaining time I spent in the hospital, I listened for the sound of that lullaby. Amidst the horrible sounds of pain and misery that surrounded me, I strained to hear the sound of hope (*The Presbyterian Outlook*, November 20, 2006, page 11).

Jeremiah was a prophet who had learned to wait for the sound of hope. In Jeremiah 33 the prophet describes God as the one who keeps promises. "The days are surely coming when I will fulfill the promise I made (Jeremiah 33:14)." Jeremiah is convinced that the darkness of war and injustice that engulfs him is not the final word. He believes that God is determined to make the world right.

As the city of Jerusalem is falling to its enemies, Jeremiah chooses not to listen to the music of despair which is all around him. Instead he listens to music that others do not hear. He pays good money to make an investment in real estate. At the moment when everyone is selling Jeremiah wants to buy. He offers top dollar for land that is worthless. His purchase is a sign that God's promise of wholeness and justice will be fulfilled. This purchase demonstrates that Jeremiah is turning his life to the sound of hope. He lights a candle in the darkness.

In the same way the sound of hope empowers us to continue the work God has given us. The worries of this world should never deflect us from participating in God's ministry of creating wholeness for all people. In colonial times, an eclipse of the sun caught members of a New England legislature by surprise. Legislators were in panic that the end of the world had come. As the darkness engulfed them one member leaped to his feet and made a motion to adjourn. But another legislator rose in the darkness and said, "Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. If it is the end of the world, I choose to be found doing my duty. I move you, sir, let the candles be brought (quoted by Joanna M. Adams, *Christian Century*, November 28, 2006, page 18)."

In the darkness of our time, let us bring on the candles so that we may turn our lives to the sound of hope.