

"HOPE IN THE NIGHT"

Isaiah 60:1-8

Dec. 18, '83

TEXT: "For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people; but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee....And the Gentiles shall cometo thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising."
Isaiah 60:2,3

DARKNESS. THE NIGHT. ALTHOUGH IN OUR MINDS WE KNOW THAT DARKNESS AND LIGHT, NIGHT AND DAY, ARE SIMPLY PART OF THE NATURAL RHYTHM OF OUR EXISTENCE, IN THE HUMAN IMAGINATION THE LIGHT OF DAY SYMBOLIZES HOPE AND THE VISION OF A BETTER WORLD, WHILE THE DARKNESS OF NIGHT MEANS FEAR, ISOLATION, AND OBLIVION. JOHN MILTON, WHOSE "PARADISE LOST" PORTRAYS OUR HUMAN CONDITION AS CREATURES WHO HAVE FALLEN FROM THE PARADISE OF LIGHT, CRIES OUT IN THE BLINDNESS:

"O DARK, DARK, DARK, AMID THE BLAZE OF NOON
IRRECOVERABLY DARK, TOTAL ECLIPSE
WITHOUT ALL HOPE OF DAY"--

although his great poem is evidence enough that he knew the HOPE THAT PENETRATES THE NIGHT, FOR HIM THE NIGHT STOOD FOR THE DARK, IRRATIONAL DISORDER AND NOTHINGNESS THAT THREATENS THE HUMAN RACE. IN ONE GREAT SCENE HE PICTURES THE HOSTS OF HELL SHOUTING THEIR DEFIANCE AS THE SOUND OF MUSIC:

"SONOROUS METAL BLOWING MARTIAL SOUNDS
AT WHICH THE UNIVERSAL HOST UPSENT
A SHOUT THAT TORE HELL'S CONVAVE, AND BEYOND
FRIGHTED THE REIGN OF CHAOS AND OLD NIGHT."

WOULD I BE WRONG IN SAYING THAT TODAY IT IS THE REIGN OF CHAOS AND OLD NIGHT THAT FRIGHTENS US? WE WELCOME THE CHRISTMAS SEASON, WHETHER WE ARE BELIEVING CHRISTIANS OR NOT, BECAUSE FOR A WEEK OR TWO WE CAN HAVE A GLIMPSE OF A WORLD WHERE ANIMOSITIES ARE DIMINISHED, WHERE LOVE GETS A CHANCE, WHERE SOME SPONTANEOUS JOY BREAKS LOOSE -- AND WE ALMOST DARE TO HOPE THAT THIS IS THE DIRECTION TO WHICH ALL CREATION MOVES. THEN WHAT SOME CALL THE REAL WORLD RETURNS WITH ITS TALES OF CRUELTY, BRUTALITY, AND MINDLESS VIOLENCE. WHY DO WE KEEP SAYING "MINDLESS" TODAY? BECAUSE SO MUCH OF THE VIOLENCE MAKES NO SENSE -- NOT EVEN EVIL SENSE. SO WE ARE AFRAID THAT, BEHIND THE TRANSIENT EXPERIENCE WE HAVE OF A GOOD LIFE WITH ITS BEAUTY, ITS LOVE AND JOY AND HOPES, THERE LIES SHEER CHAOS -- A UNIVERSE THAT ROLLS ON ITS WAY BACK TO THE PRIMEVAL DARKNESS WITH NO ONE THERE TO CARE. SO WE ARE TEMPTED TO BE LIKE CHILDREN -- NOT THE CHILDREN JESUS TOLD US TO BE WITH A SIMPLE TRUST IN THE HEAVENLY FATHER, BUT JUST CHILDREN AFRAID OF THE DARK.

Christmas
 ON THIS ~~DAY OF THE ADVENT~~ WE OPEN THE BIBLE AND LET IT SPEAK AGAIN. IT DOESN'T SPEAK ABOUT A DISTANT IDEAL WORLD TO WHICH WE CAN FLY TO FORGET TROUBLES. IT SPEAKS OF THE REAL WORLD WE KNOW. THE BIBLE DOESN'T ASK US TO CLOSE OUR EYES AND PRETEND THAT ALL IS WELL. IT LET'S US SEE THE DARKNESS IN ALL ITS GRIMNESS AND THREAT. FROM THE MIDDLE OF THE BOOK I TAKE THESE WORDS OF THE PROPHET: "BEHOLD, THE DARKNESS SHALL COVER THE EARTH, AND GROSS DARKNESS THE PEOPLE THE MAN WHO WROTE THAT WAS LIVING IN A TIME OF WIDESPREAD FEAR AND DESPAIR. HE HAD SEEN THE DESTRUCTION OF ALL HE HELD DEAR. THE PEOPLE OF GOD AND THEIR HOLY LAND HAD BEEN INVADDED AND ENSLAVED. HE WAS IN EXILE. ALL AROUND GREAT POWERS JOSTLED FOR SUPREMACY, AND THOUSANDS DIED IN BATTLE OR CAPTIVITY. AND HOW DOES HE RESPOND IN THIS DARK NIGHT FOR THE HUMAN RACE? WITH WORDS OF INDOMITABLE HOPE. "BUT" HE SAYS, WITH THAT GREAT "BUT" OF THE BELIEVER, "BUT THE LORD SHALL ARISE UPON THEE, AND HIS GLORY SHALL BE SEEN UPON THEE. AND THE GENTILES SHALL COME TO THY LIGHT AND KINGS TO THE BRIGHTNESS OF THY RISING." INTO THE NIGHT COMES THE SONG OF HOPE.

TURN BACK TO THE BEGINNING OF THE BIBLE AND WE FIND THE SOURCE OF THIS EXTRAORDINARY FAITH. IN THE SAGA OF CREATION WE READ THAT "THE EARTH WAS WITHOUT FORM AND VOID: AND DARKNESS WAS UPON THE FACE OF THE DEEP." BUT "THE SPIRIT OF GOD MOVED UPON THE FACE OF THE WATERS. AND GOD SAID, LET THERE BE LIGHT: AND THERE WAS LIGHT." INTO THE NIGHT COMES THE SONG OF HOPE.

TURN FORWARD TO THE OPENING OF THE N.T. AND WE HEAR OF YET ANOTHER NIGHT. THE STORY IN MATTHEW AND LUKE IS ANYTHING BUT THE JOLLY PAGEANT OF OUR CHRISTMAS CARDS, AND THE STILL AND STARRY NIGHT OF OUR CAROLS IS NOT THE DOMINANT NOTE. IT WAS A NIGHT WHEN THE POWER OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE STRETCHED OUT TO TAX THE PEASANTS OF GALILEE, A NIGHT WHEN HUNDREDS WERE HUNGRY REFUGEES, A NIGHT WHEN HEROD PLOTTED A MASSACRE OF INFANTS, A NIGHT WHEN DEVOUT SHEPHERDS AND HOUSEWIVES PONDERED THE WORDS OF ISALAH: "FOR, BEHOLD, THE DARKNESS SHALL COVER THE EARTH, AND GROSS DARKNESS THE PEOPLE." AND IT WAS THEN -- WHEN THE KINGDOM OF GOD SEEMED FATHER AWAY THEN IT DOES TODAY -- THAT HOPE FLARED WITH A NEW AND UNQUENCHABLE LIGHT. "THE LORD SHALL ARISE UPON THEE, AND HIS GLORY SHALL BE SEEN UPON THEE. AND THE NATIONS SHALL COME TO THY LIGHT, AND KINGS TO THE BRIGHTNESS OF THY RISING." WHERE WAS THIS GLORY OF THE LORD? WHERE WERE THE NATIONS? WHERE WERE THE KINGS? IN THE MYSTERY OF THAT

HOLY NIGHT ALL WERE TO BE FOUND WHERE NO ONE WOULD THINK OF LOOKING -- IN A MANGER IN A STABLE WHERE LAY AN INFANT IN WHOM THE GLORY OF GOD TOOK A HUMBLE HUMAN SHAPE, TO WHOM THE GENTILES CAME, AND BEFORE WHOM ALL HUMAN POWERS WILL EVENTUALLY BOW. JESUS, SON OF GOD, WAS DELIVERED IN THE NIGHT, DELIVERED TO THE DANGERS OF THE DARKNESS, DELIVERED TO THE CROSS FROM WHICH HE TRIUMPHED AND THE PRINCE OF DARKNESS WAS CAST OUT. THUS IT WAS THAT INTO THAT NIGHT CAME THE SONG OF AN ETERNAL AND UNCONQUERABLE HOPE.

CAN YOU HEAR IT TODAY? YOU WON'T HEAR IT WHERE CYNICS SPEAK AND WRITE AS IF THERE WERE NO FUTURE FOR THE HUMAN RACE. YOU WON'T HEAR IT WHERE CHRISTMAS IS LITTLE MORE THAN A REVEL AND AN EXCUSE FOR GETTING DRUNK. YOU WON'T HEAR IT WHERE NOTHING MATTERS BUT THE OPULENCE OF PRESENTS AND THE CLICKING OF THE CASH REGISTER. BUT YOU MAY HEAR IT IN THE CHUCKLE OF THE CHILD WITH HIS STOCKING, IN THE LOVE THAT KEEPS A HOME TOGETHER, IN THE VISIT OF A FRIEND TO THE LONELY, IN THE DECORATIONS OF A HOSPITAL WARD, IN THE INFECTIOUS BELIEF OF MILLIONS THAT LOVE IS STILL THE GREATEST THING IN THE WORLD. YOU WILL HEAR IT WHERE MUSIC AND THE ARTS STILL PROCLAIM THAT THE HUMAN FAMILY WAS NOT MADE FOR EXTINCTION AND BEAUTY MATTERS MORE THAN BOMBS.

YOU WILL SURELY HEAR THE SONG OF HOPE IN THE NIGHT AS WE DRAW NEAR TO WORSHIP THE ONE WHO IS STILL IN OUR DAY WHAT HE HAS BEEN THROUGH EVERY TIME OF DARKNESS FOR TWO THOUSAND YEARS. THIS IS ONE OF THOSE MOMENTS WHEN, FOR ANY OF US, THE HEAVENS CAN OPEN TO REASSURE US THAT THE UNIVERSE IS IN THE LOVING HANDS OF GOD -- A GOD WHO WILL LEAD US THROUGH THE DARKNESS, AS WE RESPOND WITH FAITH AND HOPE AND LOVE, BECKONING US ON TO THE END OF THE JOURNEY. AND THAT IS DESCRIBED IN THE LAST BOOK OF THE BIBLE, THAT MYSTERIOUS REVELATION WHERE IT IS WRITTEN: "THE CITY HAD NO NEED OF THE SUN, NEITHER OF THE MOON, TO SHINE IN IT: FOR THE GLORY OF THE LORD DID LIGHTEN IT, AND THE LAMB IS THE LIGHT THEREOF. AND THE NATIONS OF THEM WHICH ARE SAVED SHALL WALK IN THE LIGHT OF: AND THE KINGS OF THE EARTH DO BRING THEIR GLORY AND HONOR INTO IT. AND THE GATES OF IT SHALL NOT BE SHUT AT ALL BY DAY: FOR THERE SHALL BE NO NIGHT THERE."