Three Meditations for Christmas Day, 2018

Isaiah 52:7-10

Luke 2:1-20

Titus 2:11-14

I wonder what the percentages are of mothers who break down crying when their son comes home one day and says with a huge smile on his face, “Mom, Dad, I enlisted!” And the sons all tell their moms not to worry about it. But their moms do. Every day. They can kind of keep a lid on it as long as their boys are on our own shores. But deploy them, send them overseas, to say nothing of a combat zone? The carpets wear out for all the worried pacing of the floors, waiting for news.

Which is as it should be. Not the worry part, but the concern part. Jesus didn’t walk the earth, head in the clouds, thinking, “God’ll take care of it. Why be concerned?” Jesus didn’t preach, “Just pay no never mind to the chaos around you, because God will take care of it.” No. Search the Gospels and you often find Jesus waking early, early in the morning to pray. Sometimes we even hear of Jesus praying through the night. Worry was not Jesus’ way. But prayerful concern was. And he urged his followers to do, to be, the same!

Mom pacing the floor on behalf of her son is what we should think of when we hear in our first reading, ***“How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news.”*** Isaiah speaks to anxiety. Watchmen on the wall watching, mothers worrying, fathers trying to be the strong ones, all of them waiting for news. And then the watchmen see it. They don’t hear it. They see it. A man, a single man coming over the hill, over the mountain pass, and they can tell. I don’t know how they could tell. Maybe the messengers wore white clothes for victory and black for defeat; or maybe they wore a hat if the news was good, and no hat if the news was bad—I don’t know. But it seems that somehow when the keen sighted watchman with 20/10 vision saw the messenger topping the distant horizon, he knew. He knew whether the news was good or not. And when he saw that bearer of good news, the shout went up. First one, then all the watchmen. And mother heard them and stopped pacing the carpet. She stopped for about 1.5 seconds and then rushed out the door to the city gates to be the first to welcome and listen to the messenger. Oh, those beautiful feet. God bless those feet. God keep those feet safe. Make them fast.

But then Isaiah changes focus. It isn’t going to be a messenger, it is going to be God himself who comes over the mountain. It will be *like* when a messenger comes, only it will be better, because the great King of kings, The Lord of lords, the Faithful One of Israel, will be the one who comes for his people. And if you keep on reading in this chapter of Isaiah, you find that just as Isaiah’s prophetic vision morphs from a distant messenger to God himself, so also the matter of concern changes from military pursuits, to spiritual pursuits.

What I am saying is that Isaiah’s prophecy of a messenger bringing good news is a metaphor for the expected, future arrival of a spiritual Savior. How we pace the carpet for that news! Not as often as we should, but we do sometimes. When we fall into *that* sin—again. “Lord, deliver me!” When we hurt our loved one. “Lord, forgive me!” When we want to give up. “Lord, save me!”

Listen to the first reading for this Christmas Day. Share in the expectation of good news coming over the horizon, carried by messengers with speedy feet:

Old Testament Reading & Meditation Isaiah 52:7-10

7How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, “Your God reigns!”

8Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices; together they shout for joy. When the Lord returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes. 9Burst into songs of joy together, you ruins of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. 10The Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God.

So when the Old Testament last reading ended, *“The Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations…”* I was expecting shock-and-awe. I was expecting a smashing, bruising,crushing show of power.

Supposedly one of the great questions among the Jewish teachers of Jesus’ day was: Will the Messiah come as a humble servant or conquering king? I know which one I would like. If I can choose a deliverer, I want one I can point to and everyone looks at him and eyes go wide and they say, “Wow!” I don’t really want to point over in his general direction and people kind of squint, wondering if they missed something and ask, “Who? Which one?” And I half-apologetically explain, “He may not look real impressive, but he’s better than he looks!”

The watchmen didn’t see this one coming. And I understand why. Because the parents of this baby didn’t even have a crib to put the baby in. They didn’t even have proper baby clothes! And when the shepherds showed up at the street address given them by the angels, the purveyors of the establishment had to tell them, “You must be talking about the couple out back. They’re in the barn.” No wonder the watchmen didn’t see him coming!

But that was the angels’ message. “In a barn. A couple who, at just this moment, are having trouble making ends meet. No crib. Not even baby clothes. But he is the right Messiah for you.” And he is. Because, you see, if you were looking for an enemy for this promised Messiah to crush, what you need to do is look in a mirror. There he is. There she is. God’s enemy is you. You were born to sin. You have lived in sin. *You* don’t want a shock-and-awe Messiah. We need the other kind, the kind where the angels have to say, ***“Do not be afraid… A Savior has been born to you… peace on earth.”***  This Savior establishes peace with you. He will powerfully take on your enemies: sin, death and the devil, and he will *crush* them. But to others of his enemies, us, “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

He comes to save from the sins we own. The sins of youth and adulthood; of weakness and choice; of thought word and deed; of—how do the Ten Commandments go—sins of idolatry, cussing, spiritual neglect, disrespect, hatred, lust, greed, gossip and desire.” He saves us from all of those!

To rightly convey to us God’s true desire for peace with us, when “The Lord lays bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations,” what we see is a humble baby. The sort of Savior where you point over in his general direction and people kind of squint, wondering if they missed something and ask, “Who? Which one?” And you half-apologetically explain, “He may not look real impressive, but he’s better than he looks!”

And so poor, humble, under-educated shepherds became Israel’s watchmen and messengers. And they were *great* watchmen and messengers. They went. They saw. And their beautiful feet feet carried them, raising the cry, and people heard.

Gospel Reading & Meditation Luke 2:1-20

1In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. 2(This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3And everyone went to his own town to register.

4So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 6While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

8And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. 12This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” 13Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 14“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”

15When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” 16So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. 17When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, 18and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. 19But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. 20The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Acts of kindness are powerful. Most people realize this, whether they are people of faith or even not. Kindness has its own profound power. Think of a couple recent catchphrases: “Pay it forward.” “Just be kind.” Too bad we sometimes need catchy phrases to get us off our keisters and be kind.

But those are so many words. Let me give you an act of kindness in my life, that changed me, that still moves me, even though I have thought of this literally hundreds of times through my life. Someone who was taking care of me for a day went to McDonalds with me. Now, let me tell you this, some of you have gone to Disney World more often than I went to McDonald’s when I was a kid. (Well, maybe that is an exaggeration, but not by much. We didn’t have a McD’s within half an hour of our house.) So when this person who was taking care of me for a day wanted to do something special, he took me to McDonald’s, and he knew it was like going to Disney World for me. But here is what really got me, he told me to get whatever sandwich I wanted. Well, that had never happened before. Mom and Dad always ordered us kids the cheapest thing on the menu. So I ordered. And we got in the car and drove off down I-94 and I was happy, I mean, I was happy. Until I realized that my keeper didn’t have anything. And I wondered out loud why he didn’t, and he said something I don’t remember, and somehow I could see through whatever it was he said and I knew that he couldn’t afford to get anything for himself, but he had just for me.

That’s my act of kindness story. What’s yours? I am going to give you five seconds here. What is your act of kindness story?

Those things change you. Don’t forget them. Acts of kindness are powerful.

Those kindnesses are just dim little reflections of Jesus’ kindness for us. He who didn’t have to go through the pain and shame of being bullied, he was. He who didn’t have to know the sorrow of loved ones dying, he became human and mourned. He who didn’t have to feel the spiraling darkness of rejection, he took that load up on his shoulders for us. And Jesus did something for us that he, like my McDonald’s benefactor, couldn’t afford to do for himself. He got us out of hell—but he couldn’t get himself out of hell.

Oh, I haven’t lived up to it. But that fast food incident of my life has sometimes in my life made me stop and change what I was doing, thinking. Acts of kindness, you know, are powerful. And so is Jesus’. The kindness of Jesus makes me stand back and say, I want to change. I want his kindness to make a difference in my life. I want to say “No” to the temptations that benefit me and no one else. And I want the kindness of his first visit to earth to focus me on the second time he will appear on earth.

Final Reading & Meditation Titus 2:11-14

11The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. 12It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, 13while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, 14who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.