

Christ's and St. Luke's, Norfolk, VA
December 24th, 2019
Christmas Eve – Selection I (A)
A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. James B. Magness

Luke 2:1-14(15-20)

Author's Note: This sermon contains a factual omission. When composed I used a secondary source for the recollection of Jessye Norman's rendition of "Amazing Grace." This source implied that Ms. Norman's stated performance was in 2013 after Nelson Mandela's death. In fact, this particular performance by Ms. Norman occurred during the 1988 tribute to Mr. Mandela on the occasion of his 70th birthday. To the best of my knowledge all other facts are accurate as stated.

Robert Louis Stevenson, the Scots novelist, poet, and essayist is probably best known for his book "Treasure Island." Stevenson is less known for the stories he told of his 19th Century childhood when he lived in a small Scottish village. One of those stories was about looking out the window and watching the lamp lighter use an open flame to physically light the street lamps. As a young Robert Louis Stevenson watched this nightly occurrence, one by one the bright lights appeared in the midst of the dank and foggy evening. He likened the work of the lamp lighter to poking "...holes in the darkness."¹

Listening to our story through the words of scripture, a central message is that God and God's messengers have poked holes in our sometimes dark realities. God's Holy Spirit has challenged our impenetrable darkness and broken-ness, and made the unredeemable whole and holy. We cannot and will not ever understand God's acts of love for us. God sent his son our Lord Jesus to do for us what we could not and would not do for ourselves. Tonight, on this night of nights, we have heard of God's unsurpassable and un-repressible love. From ancestor David, from common shepherds in a field on the outskirts of Bethlehem, from Mary and Joseph, and over and above the harassment of Emperor Caesar Augustus, God's love has appeared in the flesh and blood of Jesus the Christ. Never will we fully understand it. We can, however, learn to let go of the things in this life to which we cling so tightly, so that we can be open to receive overflowing love and forgiveness God in Jesus Christ.

Seven years ago the remarkable South African leader Nelson Mandela died. During the commemorations of his sacrificial leadership people around the globe reminded themselves that during a particularly dark time in South African history Nelson Mandela appeared as a bright light that led toward freedom from severe racial and tribal divisions. Journalist Bill Moyers produced a story of Mandela's achievements in a documentary by the name of "Amazing Grace." In the documentary is a scene from London's Wembley Stadium where a number of musicians such as the well known rock group Guns 'n Roses gathered for a 12-hour music concert interspersed with speakers

¹ <https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poem/lamplighter/>. Accessed 12/24/19.

to commemorate the life of Mandela. At times the concert crowd became unruly and almost out of control as they loudly demanded repeated curtain calls for many of the musical groups.

Unknown to the majority of the concert attendees, the promoters had chosen opera singer Jessye Norman to perform the closing act. In stark contrast to those who had come before her, Jessye took the stage and without a note of musical accompaniment began to sing a stirring rendition of "Amazing Grace."

As Jessye Norman walked onto the stage, a darkness-piercing spot-light circle of light was cast upon her. Though when she began to sing, there were some residual calls for more Guns 'n Roses, gradually that began to diminish. In the midst of these cries, she began in an a cappella fashion to sing, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me."

Remarkably, a different spirit began to fall upon the crowd. Seventy-thousand music fans became silent before the grace of God and Jessye Norman. By the time she began the second verse, "'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved..." the crowd was hers. As she began the third verse, "'Tis grace that brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home," thousands of fans began to delve back into their memories to sing with her. Later Jessye Norman confessed that she had no idea what power had descended upon Wembley Stadium that night.²

Now in the midst of a long and dark Virginia night you and I have gathered together to once again rehearse the story of our faith; the story of God's unmerited and unprecedented goodness toward us. We can see that God's story can and does intersect with our story. Once again we affirm that the same goodness and love of God that can poke holes into the darkness of a night long ago, is the same goodness and love of God that may even be able to penetrate the protective shells you and I have constructed around our hearts and our souls. Out of the darkness comes the light of Christ.

Thanks be to God! AMEN.

² <https://billmoyers.com/content/amazing-grace-bill-moyers/>. Accessed 12/24/19.