

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons
Isaiah 11: 1-9, 9: 1-7
“A Gift of Grace”
3rd Sunday of Advent – Year C
December 13, 2015

We have Georg Frederic Handel to thank or to blame for making Isaiah 9 familiar to so many.

We can thank Handel for making Isaiah 9 familiar to us...the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light...and he shall be called Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace...because it is as beautiful and as hopeful a passage of Scripture as one can imagine.

But sometimes familiarity is not the best thing when it comes to reading Scripture. Sometimes familiarity with a particular passage of Scripture leads us to think that we know what it is saying to us, so we shift into autopilot and cease to listen.

And when it comes to Isaiah 9, we are prone to jumping ahead to Jesus and interpreting the prophecy as applying solely to his birth.

And so as we listen to these familiar words today, let us first go back to the original context in which these words were spoken and written.

The back story to Isaiah 9 is the long-standing domination of the tribes of Zebulon and Naphtali, two of the twelve tribes of Israel, by powerful foreign nation-states. Because of their location, the two tribes were especially vulnerable to attack. As pawns of powerful states, subjection and oppression were their reality.

In the midst of this reality, the prophet speaks...

The land of deep darkness for these conquered people was a land of brutality, a land of poverty and hunger, a land without hope. No one felt safe. Every asset they had was likely to be usurped by the conquerors. Every field planted with crops could be harvested and stored in the silos of the captors. Every child who was born could be snatched out of its parents' arms into slavery.

This was a land of deep darkness.

Into the midst of this world of terror comes a shining light. The light does not come from the conquerors. The light does not come from the hard work and sweat and tears of the people of Zebulon and Naphtali. The light comes from God. God alone is the deliverer. Did you catch the claim of who has the power being reinforced in verses 3 and 4: “*You* have multiplied the nation.” “*You* have increased its joy.”?

The people have not multiplied the nation themselves. They have not increased their joy. God alone is the bringer of light.

The decisive victory that only God can deliver is invoked in verse 4 through the image of “the day of Midian.” In Judges 6, the people of Israel cried out for deliverance from domination by the Midian empire. God sent Gideon, who, with clearly inferior military forces, defeated the Midian army. The victory could only be attributed to the intervention of this mighty God. (1)

Throughout the prophet's words, God who is the light and brings the light is at center stage. No longer do political rulers claim center stage. God's sovereignty trumps theirs.

The challenge, of course, is that when people are “in a land of deep darkness,” that is, when fear overwhelms the noble ideals of one's nation, when extreme and mean-spirited political rhetoric moves to center stage, when terrorism is power, we can fail to see how the God who has delivered us in the past is at work in the present.

In another time and place, that time being the first century and that place being the ancient middle east, when people couldn't see the light, when people couldn't recognize God who was acting on their behalf, the One in whom we Christians place our trust, the One we believe is the ultimate embodiment of Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace, told stories, simple stories from everyday life that we call parables.

And so, following Jesus's example, I offer you a parable. It is the best kind of parable because it actually happened. It happened in a grocery store in North Brunswick, New Jersey, of all places.

If I had to give it a name, I would call it A Parable of Two Christians.

It begins not with either of these two Christians, but with a woman named Heba Macksoud.

Since her Shoprite supermarket opened in 2003, Heba Macksoud has shopped there every Friday morning, stocking up on groceries for her family of six before going to the afternoon service, the juma, at her mosque. She always goes shopping with her friend and neighbor Lisa Yu, a bargain hunter she calls the Coupon Queen. And she always wears a hijab, the head scarf associated with her Muslim faith.

Heba Macksoud was grocery shopping on the morning of September 25. She was about 90 minutes into what was usually her two-hour trawl through the aisles of her grocery store. At the end of the detergent aisle, she noticed a couple of white men talking. She noticed the large cross that one of the men, the first Christian in this parable, was wearing. As she neared him, she heard the word "Bible." When she passed him, he said in a raised voice, "not like the Quran those Muslims read." Then he uttered an obscenity.

Ms. Macksoud was shaken. Shaken though she was, however, she responded with a forced calm which she did not feel, "You didn't have to say that."

Samuel Freedman who wrote of this encounter in the *New York Times* this past week wrote "Her flesh felt as if it were quivering. Her mind went so blank she made a wrong turn, and instead of heading into frozen food [where she was originally headed], she was adrift and searching for her friend, Ms. Yu. "She was shocked and angry," Ms. Yu recalled, "More in a kind of disbelief that something like this could happen to her."

With Ms. Yu at her side, she went to the Customer Service counter to report what had happened. The assistant manager working that day was Mark Egan. Ms. Macksoud said to Mark Egan, "I'm not done shopping, but I don't feel safe here."

Mark Egan is the second Christian in this parable. He is a member of St. Rose of Lima, which parenthetically is Bruce Springsteen's parish church.

Mark Egan told Heba Macksoud he would protect her. For the next half hour, he walked alongside her on the pretense of checking inventory as she did the rest of her grocery shopping.

What happened after this is that over the course of the next few weeks the word got out about what Mr. Egan had done. The story got some media play, and ultimately Mr. Egan was given an award by the Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom, an organization which was begun to bring Jewish and Muslim women together.

And what do you suppose was this response of the second Christian in this Parable of Two Christians when he was told he was getting this award? It was, "I was just doing my job." (2)

Friends, our calling as people of faith in these days when fear and anxiety are the miasma that is choking us is to just do our job.

And our job...

Our job simply to receive the light of God as the gift of grace that it is, to take it into ourselves, and breathe it back out into the world, trusting that the One who has saved us from the deep darkneses of the past is at work among us in the here and now to bring us and the whole world back into the light.

In Isaiah 11, we are given a vision of the peaceable kingdom that will be our reality when it all comes to pass.

(1) Amy Oden, "Commentary on Isaiah 9: 1-4," www.workingpreacher.org, January 23, 2011.

(2) Samuel G. Freedman, "A Parable on Bigotry, Citizenship and Shopping, *The New York Times*, December 12, 2015.