

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Lib McGregor Simmons**  
**Isaiah 58-61(selected verses)**  
**“Conflict to Reconciliation”**  
**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent – Year C**  
**December 203, 2015**

(Star Wars music)

How could I not begin this week’s sermon with a prelude from Star Wars?

John Williams’s music alerts anyone who hears it that a big-screen blockbuster involving themes of life and death is about to appear on the movie screen.

Just so, the section of Scripture which is our text for today begins with a similar flourish. The prophet announces: Shout out! Do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet!” (Isaiah 58: 1)

The life or death matter which the prophet introduces is situated in the sixth century BCE as the exiles from Babylonian and then Persian captivity returned to Jerusalem through the good graces of King Cyrus of Persia. The narrative embedded in the canon informs readers that a major conflict had arisen between those who had remained behind in Jerusalem and those who had returned from the diaspora. Living conditions were extremely difficult. Jerusalem, including the Temple, was in ruins. The people were now divided—not against some outside threat or enemy, but among themselves. (1)

In the midst of the darkness of their dispute, the prophet calls them back to righteous living in accord with God’s *torah*, that is, life that is centered and ordered in God.

6Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? 7Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? 8Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. 9Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, 10if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. (Isaiah 58: 6-10)

The prophet was calling the whole community to *torah* living. He was not singling out specifically about life lived in the context of our families, but surely life in families was a part of it.

One aspect of *torah* living that the prophet mentions is not hiding ourselves from our own kin. It is laying aside our penchant for the pointing of the finger and the speaking of evil. Anyone who has ever lived life in a family knows how deeply we long for this to be so. This is what the prophet—and the God for whom the prophet speaks--desires for the people. And yet anyone who has ever lived life in a family knows how difficult this is to pull off.

And perhaps at no time of year is this more difficult than during the holiday season, so filled with light from Advent candles and Christmas adornment and at one and the same time, ironically, so shrouded in the darkness that can lurk within our family systems and experiences.

Often the darkness is grief.

My own father died on the day before Father’s Day last June; I am keenly feeling anticipated his absence from the dinner table on Christmas Day. Two days ago, someone with whom Gary and I have developed a friendship over the past couple of years died. She and her husband have buried two of their own sons, and just a month or so ago, they buried their elementary-age great-granddaughter who had leukemia. I had been thinking deeply of our friends and praying for them in the loss of their granddaughter as Christmas approaches, and now our friend has died unexpectedly too and so her

husband mourns deeply. And then yesterday, someone who is dear to us suffered a heart attack and died, they will go to church on the day before Christmas Eve for his memorial service.

The prophet's words seem all too real this day for anyone who knows the pain of grief and loss:

9Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us; we wait for light, and lo! there is darkness; and for brightness, but we walk in gloom. 10We grope like the blind along a wall, groping like those who have no eyes; we stumble at noon as in the twilight, among the vigorous as though we were dead. 11We all growl like bears; like doves we moan mournfully. We wait for justice, but there is none; for salvation, but it is far from us. (Isaiah 59: 9-11)

Yes, during Advent, we mourn, a low growl like a bear, a soft coo like a dove, subdued voices of hurt, need, and loss. (2)

Grief in our families can sheathe us in darkness and we wonder, where is this light of which the prophet speaks?

And while I would not want to elevate one kind of darkness over another for each darkness is its own unique experience, perhaps it is the memories of painful experiences within our families that can cast an even greater shadow over the living of our days, not only at Christmas but every day.

No one writes about this from the perspective of the Christian faith better than Anne Lamott, I think.

In her book *Small Victories*, there is an entire section entitled "Families." One of the chapters in the section is entitled "Dad."

"I was, seriously, a perfect daughter. I got great grades for him, kept the family together, rubbed his feet, and read way beyond my years, starting at five....I became who I am—a writer, intellectual, conversationalist—to please him.

I was twenty-three when he got sick with brain cancer in his early fifties, after which I devoted myself to his care. I took him to most of his doctor appointments, chemo, radiation, for two years. I never quite got over his death, not really, and I missed him beyond words..."

What happened, however, is that Annie's dad's former girlfriend sent her the journal that her father had kept. Annie dove into the journal, "the lake of my father being alive again, so glad to hear his voice, looking forward to the good memories—mostly, of course, of him and me.

But instead, he wrote about how comforting [his girlfriend's] company and devotion were, along with some harsh things about me, such as how unpleasant it was that I was sometimes so emotional...He wrote, 'Annie came to the hospital, full of the usual false good cheer and bad jokes.'

After reading this...I was stung, shaken to my boots. I didn't even know where to start processing this. So I cut him off. My heart was hard by the next day, when the tears stopped. I put him out, literally; I took his journal to the garage...

The bruise went so deep. Besides, it was intoxicating. Resentments make even the best of us feel superior....

People like to say, 'forgiveness begins with forgiving yourself.' ...

It does and it doesn't.

You don't get [to forgiveness] by willpower. The readiness comes from the movement of wisdom and good will, or what maybe in a crazy moment of abandon, I'd call grace...

Something deeply mysterious jiggles loose in us that finally says, I'm going to let it go, instead of breathing the hot little flame into a conflagration.

It didn't happen overnight, but Annie forgave her father. She forgave her father's former girlfriend who had sent her the journal in the first place. She rediscovered the truth that "forgiving people doesn't necessarily mean you want to meet them for lunch. It means that you try to undo the Velcro hook," relying on those wise words of Lewis Smedes, "To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you."

“Not that she doesn’t get [the conflict and the resentment] out every so often, for old time’s sake. But the trapped cloud is not nearly so dark or dense. It was blown into wisps of smoke, of snow, of ocean spray.” (3)

My dear brothers and sisters, if the darkness of grief is overshadowing you this season, hear these hope-filled words of the prophet spoken to you and trust that God’s grace will make them true for you in good time.

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. (Isaiah 60: 1)

My dear brothers and sisters, if the darkness of resentments, grudges, conflict is holding you prisoner this season, hear these hope-filled words of the prophet spoken to you and trust that God’s grace will make them true for you in good time.

The sun shall no longer be your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night; but the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. 20Your sun shall no more go down, or your moon withdraw itself; for the Lord will be your everlasting light. (Isaiah 60: 19-20)

1. Dirk G. Lange, “Commentary on Isaiah 60: 1-6,” [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org), January 6, 2013.
2. Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 198.
3. Anne Lamott, *Small Victories: Spotting Improbable Moments of Grace* (New York: Riverhead, 2014), 104-118.