

Isaiah 7:10-16  
November 29, '09

“DEATH’S DARK SHADOWS”

JOHN MASON NEALE WAS A PRIEST IN THE ANGLICAN CHURCH IN THE 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY.  
HE WAS A VERY ACCOMPLISHED & INTELLIGENT MAN WHO COULD SPEAK 20 LANGUAGES.  
HE WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE FOUNDING OF SOMETHING CALLED THE SISTERS OF ST.  
MARGARET THAT INCLUDED AN ORPHANGE, A SCHOOL FOR GIRLS & A COLLECTION OF INDIVIDUALS  
WHO SOUGHT TO OFFER ASSISTANCE TO THOSE WHO WERE DOWN & OUT.

NEALE IS ALSO THE WRITER OF THE SONG “GOOD KING WENCESLAS” WHICH IMMORTALIZED  
THE TRUE STORY OF A BOHEMIAN MONARCH WHO WAS KNOWN FOR HIS GOOD DEEDS.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SERVING OTHERS WAS OBVIOUSLY A HIGH PRIORITY IN THE LIFE OF JOHN  
MASON NEALE.

HE IS BEST-KNOWN TO MOST OF US, THOUGH, AS THE TRANSLATOR OF THE OLDEST & MOST  
WELL-KNOWN HYMN OF THE ADVENT SEASON,

NEALE CAME ACROSS A LATIN CHANT FROM THE 9<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY & TURNED IT INTO THE HYMN –  
“O COME, O COME, EMMANUEL.”

THE WORDS OF THE HYMN ARE FILLED WITH A MOOD OF JOYOUS ANTICIPATION.

*“DISPERSE THE GLOOMY CLOUDS OF NIGHT & DEATH’S DARK SHADOWS PUT TO FLIGHT.”*

AS WE ENTER THE ADVENT SEASON, WE DO SO IN A SPIRIT OF HOPE & EXPECTANCY.

THAT’S WHAT THE ADVENT SEASON IS ALL ABOUT.

WE HEAR THESE WORDS OF THE PROPHET ISAIAH & THEY OFFER US HOPE.

THEY ASSURE US THAT WE CAN EXPECT SOMETHING TO HAPPEN IN THE FUTURE – SOMETHING  
GOOD & POWERFUL & UPLIFTING.

WE CAN BE ASSURED THAT “DEATH’S DARK SHADOWS” WILL NEVER HAVE THE LAST WORD.

THIS IS A DIFFICULT PASSAGE, THOUGH.

IT’S NOT A PASSAGE THAT IS AT ALL UNDERSTANDABLE OUTSIDE OF ITS SPECIFIC SETTING.

I DON’T WANT TO BORE YOU WITH A BIBLICAL HISTORY LESSON, SO I’LL PUT IT INTO ITS  
CONTEXT AS BRIEFLY AS POSSIBLE.

IN THE 8<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY B.C., KING AHAZ OF JUDAH WAS FACING ATTACK FROM THE UNIFIED  
FORCES OF TWO NATIONS.

DEATH’S DARK SHADOWS WERE THREATENING.

AHAZ WAS TEMPTED TO COMMIT TO AN ALLIANCE HIMSELF WITH THE WORLD’S GREATEST  
POWER AT THE TIME – THE NATION OF ASSYRIA.

ISAIAH’S MESSAGE TO KING AHAZ IS, *“DON’T DO IT. DON’T BE TEMPTED TO JOIN FORCES WITH  
SOMEONE ELSE. YOU DON’T HAVE TO. THOSE NATIONS ATTACKING YOU WON’T SURVIVE. YOU DON’T HAVE  
TO TURN TO ANYONE BUT GOD FOR PROTECTION.”*

ISAIAH SUSPECTS THAT AHAZ ISN'T GOING TO ABIDE BY HIS SUGGESTIONS, SO HE CHALLENGES AHAZ TO ASK FOR A SIGN TO VERIFY THAT HIS ADVICE IS SOUND.

AHAZ REFUSES & HE DOES SO BY PRETENDING THAT HIS REASONING IS NOBLE – THAT HE KNOWS IT ISN'T RIGHT TO PUT GOD TO THE TEST.

THAT'S FINE & IT'S TRUE – BUT IN THIS CASE, IT'S GOD WHO'S TELLING HIM TO DO IT!

SO ISAIAH, IN EXASPERATION, TELLS AHAZ HE'S GOING TO GIVE HIM A SIGN WHETHER HE WANTS IT OR NOT!

AND HERE'S WHERE THIS PASSAGE HAS ITS ADVENT SIGNIFICANCE.

IT'S IN VERSE 14 – *“AND THE YOUNG WOMAN IS WITH CHILD & SHALL BEAR A SON, AND SHALL CALL HIM IMMANUEL.”*

NOW AS WE STAND ON THIS SIDE OF THE CHRISTMAS STORY, WE HAVE A CERTAIN UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT THIS MEANS.

WE SEE HOW MATTHEW TOOK THESE WORDS FROM ISAIAH & INCORPORATED THEM INTO HIS CHRISTMAS NARRATIVE.

IN HIS FIRST CHAPTER, HE SAYS, *“ALL THIS TOOK PLACE TO FULFILL WHAT HAD BEEN SPOKEN BY THE LORD THROUGH THE PROPHET: ‘LOOK THE VIRGIN SHALL CONCEIVE AND BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL NAME HIM EMMANUEL,’ WHICH MEANS ‘GOD IS WITH US.’”*

BUT IN THIS PASSAGE IN ISAIAH, THE PURPOSE OF THIS SIGN IS NOT IN THE SIGNIFICANCE OF HIS BIRTH OR HIS PARENTS OR HIS MISSION.

I THINK WHAT ISAIAH IS REALLY TRYING TO SAY HERE IS – *“YOU DON'T NEED TO FEAR THESE TWO KINGS - THESE TWO NATIONS AND THEIR ATTACKING ARMIES - BECAUSE BY THE TIME A CHILD BORN TODAY WOULD REACH THE AGE WHERE HE COULD REFUSE EVIL & CHOOSE GOOD, THEY'LL NO LONGER BE A THREAT TO YOU.”*

AND IT IS THE NAME OF THE CHILD THAT IS MOST SIGNIFICANT.

HE SAYS THE NAME IS “EMMANUEL,” WHICH MEANS “GOD IS WITH US.”

IF YOU PUT YOUR TRUST IN GOD, GOD WILL PROTECT YOU AGAINST THE ATTACKS OF OTHERS.

GOD WILL UPHOLD YOU.

GOD WILL GUIDE YOU THROUGH EVERY STORM.

GOD WILL NEVER LET THE EVIL FORCES OF YOUR LIFE HAVE THE LAST WORD.

BUT, YOU SEE, THAT'S WHAT AHAZ COULDN'T BRING HIMSELF TO DO.

IT WAS TOO RISKY.

THE FORCES AGAINST HIM WERE TOO STRONG.

THE TEMPTATION TO TURN ELSEWHERE FOR HELP WAS TOO ENTICING.

THIS PASSAGE IN ISAIAH IS VERIFICATION THAT GOD IS ON THE SIDE OF THOSE WHO PUT THEIR TRUST IN HIM, REGARDLESS OF WHAT THE ODDS SEEM TO BE.

YOU'VE SEEN THIS IN YOUR OWN LIFE, HAVEN'T YOU?

YOU'VE SEEN IT IN THE LIVES OF OTHERS.

YOU'VE SEEN GOD WORK MIGHTY MIRACLES THAT DEFY ALL THE ODDS & DEFEAT SEEMINGLY UNBEATABLE FOES.

SOME OF YOU, THOUGH, ARE SKEPTICAL.

YOU'RE TRYING TO REMEMBER A TIME WHEN THAT HAPPENED.

YOU'RE TRYING TO BRING TO MIND THOSE EXPERIENCES WHEN YOU FELT THE PRESENCE OF "EMMANUEL – GOD WITH US."

OH, IT HAPPENS.

YOU MAY HAVE MISSED IT, BUT IT HAPPENS.

YOU MAY HAVE CHALKED IT UP TO COINCIDENCE, BUT, IN REALITY, IT WAS PROVIDENCE.

GOD IS WITH US.

I HEARD A STORY RECENTLY THAT HIGHLIGHTS THE TRUTH OF THIS REALITY AS MUCH AS ANY STORY I'VE EVER HEARD.

IT HAPPENED JUST 8 YEARS AGO, A FEW DAYS BEFORE CHRISTMAS IN A LITTLE, RURAL COMMUNITY IN SOUTH CAROLINA.

IN A SMALL COMMUNITY HOSPITAL, THERE WAS A 4-YEAR-OLD GIRL WITH A RARE CONDITION THAT WAS DETERIORATING BY THE HOUR.

SHE WAS TOO ILL TO TRANSPORT & THE MEDICAL STAFF PREDICTED THAT SHE WOULD BE DEAD BY MORNING.

NO ONE HAD THE SKILL TO DEAL WITH THIS CONDITION.

THEY HAD CALLED MAJOR MEDICAL CENTERS IN THE SURROUNDING AREAS & EVERY ONE OF THEM GAVE THE SAME RECOMMENDATION – "TAKE THE CHILD TO CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL IN BOSTON."

THE FAMILY OF THE GIRL, NEVERTHELESS, WAS FILLED WITH HOPE & REMAINED STEADFAST IN THEIR TRUST IN GOD.

THEY WEREN'T NECESSARILY PRAYING FOR A MIRACLE.

THEY WERE SIMPLY FOCUSING ON GOD'S PRESENCE WITH THEM AS THEY FACED THE INEVITABLE.

THERE WAS A WOMAN IN THE SAME HOSPITAL WHO HAD JUST DELIVERED A SON SEVERAL HOURS EARLIER.

THE WOMAN'S BROTHER & HIS WIFE HAD GATHERED TO CELEBRATE THE BIRTH.

THEY WERE GOING TO STAY AT HIS SISTER'S HOUSE UNTIL NEW YEAR'S DAY.

THIS WOMAN'S BROTHER WAS RETURNING FROM THE RESTROOM WHEN HE HEARD TWO PHYSICIANS DISCUSSING THE LITTLE GIRL'S CONDITION.

HE STOPPED & ASKED ABOUT HER.

THE DOCTORS WONDERED WHY HE WAS ASKING, BUT PROCEEDED TO SAY, "THE GUY WHO WROTE THE BOOK ON THIS CONDITION OPERATES AT CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL IN BOSTON.

HIS ANSWERING SERVICE SAID HE WAS OUT OF TOWN. SINCE IT'S CHRISTMAS, ONLY ONE OF HIS TEAM IS ON CALL & HE WANTS US TO IMMEDIATELY FLY THE GIRL TO BOSTON.

BUT WE'RE AFRAID SHE'S TOO WEAK & COULDN'T SURVIVE THE FLIGHT."

THIS MAN LOOKED AT THE TWO DOCTORS & ASKED, "WHAT'S THE NAME OF THIS OUT-OF-TOWN SPECIALIST?"

"PETER CLEMENSON."

THE BROTHER'S EYES GOT BIG AND HE SAID, "AS COINCIDENTAL AS IT MAY SEEM, THAT'S ME. LET'S GO. BRIEF ME ON THE WAY. WE'RE VACATIONING WITH MY SISTER WHO JUST DELIVERED MY NEPHEW 5 HOURS AGO.

CAN YOU GET AN ANESTHESIOLOGIST & A SURGICAL TEAM? YOU'LL HAVE TO FUDGE ON HOSPITAL PROTOCOLS, BUT THIS GIRL'S LIFE IS AT STAKE."

THE 2 ASTONISHED DOCTORS LOOKED AT ONE ANOTHER & SAID, "WHAT PROTOCOLS?"

THEY WERE PREPPED & PERFORMING SURGERY WITHIN AN HOUR.

THE HOSPITAL WAS BUZZING WITH THE NEWS OF THE DRAMA UNFOLDING IN THEIR MIDST.

EVERYONE ON THIS MAKESHIFT SURGICAL TEAM READILY VOLUNTEERED TO HELP AND TO OBSERVE THIS SPECIALIST AS HE DID HIS THING.

IT WAS THE WORST CASE THE DOCTOR HAD EVER SEEN BECAUSE THE CONDITION HAD DEFIED DIAGNOSIS.

THAT FAMILY, THOUGH, HAD A BLESSED CHRISTMAS BECAUSE THE SURGERY WAS SUCCESSFUL. FOLLOWING 5 VISITS TO BOSTON FOR FOLLOW-UP PROCEDURES, THE GIRL IS HEALTHY & IN MIDDLE SCHOOL TODAY.

"WHAT ARE THE CHANCES?" WE ASK.

THINK ABOUT HOW ALL OF THIS UNFOLDED.

EVERYTHING HAD TO BE PERFECT FOR THIS TO HAVE WORKED OUT AS IT DID.

EVEN THE WALK FROM THE RESTROOM HAD TO PERFECTLY COINCIDE WITH THE DISCUSSION TAKING PLACE AT THAT PRECISE MOMENT.

IN THE EVERYDAY EXPERIENCES OF LIFE, GOD'S PRESENCE MAY NOT BE NEARLY AS DRAMATIC AS THAT & YET WE CAN BE ASSURED THAT "GOD IS WITH US."

WE DON'T NEED TO TRUST IN ALLIANCES WITH THE WORLD.

WE DON'T NEED TO TURN TO THE POWERS THAT SEEM TO BE IN CONTROL OF THINGS BECAUSE THEY'RE NOT.

GOD IS THE ONE IN CONTROL & IN EVERY EXPERIENCE OF LIFE, WE NEED TO MAINTAIN OUR TRUST IN HIM.

800 YEARS AFTER ISAIAH PUT FORTH A SIGN TO KING AHAZ, THE WORLD WAS GIVEN ANOTHER SIGN.

GOD BECAME ONE OF US.

I KNOW – YOU HEAR THAT ALL THE TIME, BUT DO YOU REALLY CAPTURE THE SIGNIFICANCE OF IT?

JESUS WASN'T SIMPLY “LIKE” GOD.

HE WASN'T JUST A MAN WHO LIVED A GOOD LIFE & SHOWED US HOW TO LIVE OUR OWN LIVES.

HE WAS GOD IN THE FLESH.

HE WAS EMMANUEL – GOD WITH US.

GOD IS STILL WITH US TODAY.

YOU NEEDN'T TURN ELSEWHERE FOR HELP.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO LOOK TO THE FORCES OF POWER & STRENGTH THAT THE WORLD OFFERS.

YOU'LL NEVER BE GUIDED PROPERLY OR PROTECTED FULLY BY TRUSTING IN WHAT THE WORLD PROMISES.

OUR HOPE IS IN THE POWER AND PRESENCE OF GOD WITH US, CREATING SOMETHING NEW, TRANSFORMING US WITH LOVE, GIVING US A DIFFERENT WAY OF LIVING.

OUR HOPE IS IN THE ONE BORN AMONG US, IN THE VERY MIDST OF THE CHAOS AND THE TROUBLES AND THE TURMOIL.

OUR HOPE IS IN THE ONE WHO, BY HIS WILLINGNESS TO ENTER INTO THE DARKNESS AND SUFFERINGS OF THIS WORLD, FORGES A NEW PATH OF LIGHT THAT CUTS RIGHT THROUGH THEM.

OPEN YOUR EYES TO HIS PRESENCE IN YOUR VERY MIDST IN THE EVERYDAY EXPERIENCES OF LIFE.

GOD IS WITH US – “DISPERSING THE GLOOMY CLOUDS OF NIGHT & PUTTING DEATH'S DARK SHADOWS TO FLIGHT.”

AMEN.

*The Reverend Dr. Dennis R. Davenport  
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