

Christmas Eve – 2021

Isaiah 9:2-7

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-20

Every now and then, the sound of death comes slithering through my window. I am usually half asleep as a harrowing drama plays itself out in my ears. You see, I live not far from the wash, the Sankey, an historic irrigation canal that winds through Redlands. It's an easement, a literal "no-man's land" that runs east to west, parallel to my domesticated street, Campus Avenue. In the quiet of the night, breaking the blanket of silent darkness that covers our neighborhood, a dog is heard barking. He is not alone. He is distressed that he is not alone. Soon the coordinated "yips" of other creatures is heard. Coyotes; dog is on their menu. One can hear both the panic and the plea for help in the dog's voice. Then the dog falls silent and the cackling commences. It is an unholy sound. It is both bone-chilling and fascinating. From the safety of my bed, I am alarmed and transfixed. The sound of the celebration of death is unmistakable.

Are we preoccupied with death? It certainly seems so – to an unhealthy degree, to the detriment of living. A drama of death has come slithering through our window, demanding our attention to it and nothing else. Grima Wormtongue is a fictional character from J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of Rings* saga. Grima Wormtongue; he is a shriveled figure of a man, with a colorless face, and heavy-lidded eyes. Poison flows from Wormtongue's mouth into the ear of the king, poison meant to imprison the ruler of Rohan, King Theoden. Having his ears full of this poison, Theoden *loses* his vigor, *loses* his freedom, *loses* his love of life. Gandalf, the wizard, comes to Theoden's aid as a liberator. Wormtongue's spell is broken and Theoden regains his strength. Wormtongue offers an empty plea: "I've only EVER served you, my lord." It is a lie. Theoden's thunders his judgment: "You would have had me crawling on all fours like a beast." There are forces at work in this world that want to keep us preoccupied with death.

Here is a hymn stanza for this night, this era, a hymn for our faith, a hymn of joy and hope and clarity:

The people that in darkness sat

A glorious light have seen;

The light has shined on them who long

In shades of death have been,

In shades of death have been (The People That in Darkness Sat).

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son (Isaiah 7:14). He is the light of the world (John 8:12). In Him was life, and that life was the light of men (John 1:4). Light and life to all He brings. Christ the Savior has come. The living and life-giving Lord of all Creation chooses to associate with you, with all of you. Life is His gift; a new and impervious life, life full of love, life full of peace and contentment, confidence and truth. Christmas is the joy of man. Christmas is an inherent uplift to heart and soul. God is committed to life, full and free. Darkness is not our lord. Death is not our king. Fear will not set our agenda. "To us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6).

When life comes into the world, it does not limit itself to “sanctioned areas,” only going to those places that it is allowed to go, obeying some authoritarian diktat to stay in its lane. Life breaks down man-made barriers. The Son of God fully intended to invade all of this earth. He reclined at table with Matthew, a tax-collector, a pariah in Jewish circles. It’s the sick who need a physician, He said, not the well. Sick places, where you and I are found, that’s where Jesus goes. Jesus came to shine His light into dark places, where life is under attack, where hope hangs by a thread if it is present at all. Life ventured into the haunt of jackals, unprotected and fearless. Life came to shine. The contrast with death would be part of the case life came to make.

Jesus meets a funeral procession and stops it. The weeping widow woman had just lost her only son. Darkness ruled her heart. For *her* Christ came. Who was going to keep Him from bringing life into *her* world? Who was going to stop Him from cleaving the darkness of *her* heart? “Do not weep” said the Easter King. Do not weep said the Lord of life. It was a verbal prelude to uncontrollable joy. Jesus touched the bier, the frame that carried the coffin, the frame that carried the corpse. “Young man, I say to you, arise” (Luke 7:14). Nain was the town where that happened. Nain is Hebrew for Beauty, Pleasantness. The dead man arose and Jesus gave him to his mother. The beauty of divine life, the pleasantness of light shining in darkness broke out there, broke out then.

Some don’t want you to see it – beauty, life, light. Some don’t want you linger over the Gospel. Some want religion to stay in its lane, to stay out of the public square, stay out of consequential decisions, stay in its appointed place. The sound of death has come slithering through our windows. The sound of death is lies. Some practitioners try so hard to make their lies sound truthful. They attempt to make murder sound respectable, to make cowardice sound like courage, to give the appearance of substance to pure wind (George Orwell – paraphrase). Dark have been our dreams of late. The Wormtongues of this world have whispered in our ears: “Christianity has no answer for this.” “Christianity needs to sit in silence while science takes the helm.” The church barks in panic, and then falls silent as the cackling mob rejoices over a culture of death that expands and expands and expands.

Did Christ come to have us live like that? The sound of life is an altogether different sound. The sound of life was heard over the Judean countryside. Shepherds were out keeping watch over their flocks by night and a heavenly messenger came to them. Life was in his voice, a voice of hope and truth and grace. Light shone in that darkness; the glory of the Lord came to them. Fear gave way to wonder. Wonder gave way to action. Action took them to a manger. “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!’” Do you know what that is? That is the sound of life. We are not alone. The Son of God has come and He is in every land, every corridor of creation.

Thanks be to God, Jesus does not stay in His supposedly appointed place. No man’s land, that is where the Son of God intended to go. Even Peter didn’t want the Lord Christ to go there. “Never Lord!” he said. ‘This shall never happen to you’” (Matthew 16:22). The sound of life

was heard at that desolate place, the place of death, the place of the skull. Christ's voice carried life and He used it. "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34). Blood streamed from His body. Blood which paid for sin – yours and mine. Blood which carried life for you, life for me. The government of grace is on His shoulder. The kingdom of God comes as He gives up His life on the holy cross. "Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man" (Nicene Creed). Life was laid in a tomb. It was a dark Friday afternoon when life was laid in a tomb. The cackling of jackals was heard as Christ died, celebrating death. "Weeping may remain for a night but joy comes in the morning" (Psalm 30:5).

Life comes cascading out of the tomb. Christ the King is risen. Light and life to all He brings! Risen with healing in His wings. Truth cannot be kept in a tomb. God will not allow it. He intends to unleash His life and it is unleashed. The sound of life is still heard. The living voice of Jesus brings joy to this house. Life is on our menu. He gives and we receive. This night is full of life. You, beloved of Christ the King, you are full of life. He is present and He gives. We celebrate life. We celebrate the death of death. We celebrate life and light. We celebrate Christmas.