

What Do You Know ... For Sure? Isaiah 52:7-10

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I have waited in hospital rooms and surgery lounges both with parishioners and family. That kind of waiting is long, tense, and gut wrenching. Even the old hospital coffee cannot overpower the fear and fatigue. How long before there is some word from the doctors? And what will that word be?

I have stood often in the funeral home. Behind me, the coffin; before me, the gathered family and friends. Some are tearful, some strained, some bitter, some resolved, but they also wait. This waiting is not tense, but it is expectant. The bereaved wait for some word of hope, comfort, or reassurance; some word from God to help them live with their feelings of loss.

And I have also waited for joyful things. In the birthing room – nervously, concernedly waiting to receive our new child; or watching out the window waiting for cars to pull into the driveway as the scattered family gathers for the holidays; or scanning the passengers as they file off the plane, searching for that one special face. This is impatient and joyous waiting – straining at the restraints that keep us back from long expected loved ones.

Christmas has come at last. After all these weeks of waiting and all kinds of waiting, we finally come together to hear again the good news of Christmas. Some of us come to Christmas with overflowing joy. Others dread this season because that empty place at the table will remind them of loved ones lost; the ghosts of Christmas past. Some fear the after-holiday let down and the mid-January bills ... the ghosts of Christmas future? But today, we have come together, relieved, or lonely, excited, or depressed, but we have come. We come to hear the news. What message? What tidings? What good news does Christmas bring us? What can we know ... for sure?

I had an elderly friend who always greeted me in the same way. When I went for a visit, he'd usher me to a chair and he'd say, "*What do you know?*" And after a pause of three or four heartbeats, he'd lean forward and add, "*for sure?!*" Then he would laugh at his own humor.

But, it is a good question. **On this Christmas evening, what do we know for sure?**

- We know that God still loves us and has not given up on us.
- We know that God has sent a Savior into our world!
- We know that the baby arrived safely and his mother's heart leapt with pride, as the angels sang with joy and the shepherds gazed in awe.
- We know that unto us this child was born, unto us this son was given, and his name was Jesus, but the reality of his person was "Emanuel," God with us.

- And because of this child's birth, life, death, and return to life in our behalf, we know that everything will eventually turn out right.

Even if the surgeon comes with drooping shoulders and says, "I'm sorry. We did everything we could."

Even if the kids can't make it home for the holidays this year, or you don't get to see them today because they're going to be at the home of your former spouse.

Even if you got a Christmas pink slip instead of the raise you had hoped for.

Even if the cancer treatments resume in January,

Because of Christmas, we know that all will – eventually - be well.

Mind you, **I'm not saying that all is well, at this moment.** That would be blind folly. All is certainly not well — far from it; whether in remembering December 7th or September 11th, or hearing of the latest mass shooting in a school or church, or of a pipe bomb in the subway, new attempts at terrorism now fill our lives with a new sort of fear. Life here is still very uncertain.

But the Christian faith has never claimed that all is right with the world.

No! But we unapologetically proclaim that all will be right one day. That, in the fullness of time, God Himself will make all things right. On the other side of the pain of labor is the birthing. On the other side of each seemingly endless night is the dawn. On the other side of every death is a new life. This is the promise of Christmas, this is what we know ... for sure.

Of course we're not there yet. Christ has come, once, and he has promised to come again. So for us, these are the in-between times. That first coming at Bethlehem 20 centuries ago was proof of God's promise that, one day, all will be well. The second coming of Christ, at the end of time, will be fulfillment of that promise. But for right now we live in what C.S. Lewis has named the "shadowlands;" we can look ahead and see the light shining out into our darkness, but for now we must wait in the shadows until that fullness of time comes again.

And in these in-between times, in this shadowland, we continue to wrestle with demons both personal and real, we struggle with despair, with setbacks, we endure pain, grief, war, and death. But none of these horrors will have the final say. The message of Christmas – that which we can know for sure (because of that baby born so long ago) is that God gets the last word. And God's word to us is peace, good news, and salvation for us right now, right where we continue to live. As Jesus told his disciples and us,

*I have said this to you,
so that in me you may have peace.
In the world you face persecution.
But take courage; I have conquered the world!*
John 16:33

In Christ, with Christ, through Christ, this is where we find the true peace, even in the midst of our struggles, that gives us the strength to wait and the courage to share God's Good News with others this time of year.

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger
who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'
Isaiah 52:7

You heard the first portion of this scripture last week as the Apostle Paul repurposed a prophecy from Isaiah to emphasize our need to join with God's angels *in bringing this good news of great joy for all the people* (Luke 2:10).

When the prophet Isaiah first spoke these words, all of Israel was in spiritual and physical ruins. The Northern tribes had been dragged off into exile by the Assyrians, leaving lonely Judah to face the same aggressors now camped outside Jerusalem's gates. There was not one earthly reason for hope that Jerusalem would not soon be face a similar fate. So the prophet proclaimed good news based on a heavenly reason — God's promise of salvation. The days are surely coming the prophet declared.

Break forth together into singing,
you ruins of Jerusalem
The Lord has bared his holy arm
before the eyes of all the nations
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God.
Isaiah 52:9-10

And on that day when God bared His holy arm, the Angel told Joseph to name him "Jesus" (which means "the salvation of God") *for he will save his people from their sins.*' (Matthew 1:21). And so the world – whether or not they knew it – did see the salvation of God, as they gazed upon the face of the newborn child born to us in the shadowlands that first Christmas morning.

*"The light shines in the darkness
and the darkness did not overcome it ...
the word became flesh and lived among us
we have seen his glory
the glory of the only begotten of the father"
John 1:5 & 14*

According to tradition, the Apostle John wrote these words of encouragement to Hebrew & Greek Christians from the town of Ephesus since Jerusalem once again lay in ruins following the Roman siege of AD 70. And John also wrote these words in faith. For at the time of his writing, the young, struggling, Christian seemed hardly capable of going to the ends of the earth and the ends of the age. Yet here we are – many people have obviously been very busy while waiting out these in-between times.

What gave them the courage to push forward in Jesus' name? As the writer of Hebrews declared ...

*long ago God spoke to our ancestors
in many and various ways by the prophets,
but in these last days He has spoken to us by a son.
Hebrews 1:1*

A son!

Unto us a child has been born. Unto to us a son has been given. And the Government shall rest upon his shoulders and he shall be called wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting father, and prince of peace. (Isaiah 9:6)

That saving prophetic word became flesh – at Christmas the baby Jesus was born into our midst. It is that word that gathers us here today, and in that person that we place all our hopes.

Because of Christmas – one day – "peace on earth and good will to men" will become no longer a song but a reality.

Someday, but not yet.
Christmas doesn't end our waiting.
Christmas is the good news that gives us the strength to keep waiting!

So, however this coming day unfolds, we do well to remember that the world is not yet healed and whole, but one thing we know – for sure – is that one day it will be.

As my friend Martin Luther once said

*"This life therefore is not righteousness,
but growth in righteousness,
not health, but healing,
not being but becoming,
not rest but exercise.*

*We are not yet what we shall be,
but we are growing toward it,
the process is not yet finished,
but it is going on,
this is not the end, but it is the road.*

All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified."

This is what we know for sure, all because of that first Christmas morning.
Thanks be to God.