

PLAYING A PART: JOHN

One of the Christmas carols you may know by heart is “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear.” It is rather unique as a carol, as it doesn’t mention, at least not by name, Mary, Joseph, Jesus Christ or Bethlehem. Its lyrics were written by Edward Sears, and first published in the December issue of the *Christian Register* in 1849.

Sears was a descendent of one of the Pilgrims, who lived much of his life in Massachusetts. He was an ordained Unitarian minister, and very fond of poetry. In fact, he wrote a fair amount of it himself. Sears was said to be a very hardworking pastor, so hardworking that while serving a large parish in Lancaster, Pennsylvania he suffered from a nervous breakdown. Needing to harbor his strength he moved back to Massachusetts and took on a smaller, part-time pastorate in Wayland.

It wasn’t just Pastor Sears who suffered from a breakdown, in seemed like the whole world was going through such a trauma in the eighteen-forties. In Europe, Louise Phillippe abdicated in France after his subjects revolted in 1848. And uprisings occurred in Germany, Italy, Austria, Sicily and Belgium as well. Here in this country, many were leaving the countryside to find jobs created by the Industrial Revolution in cities like New York, Boston and Philadelphia. The Mexican-American War had just concluded. And the tensions over slavery were growing every day--and to many war seemed inevitable.

It is into this rather bleak set of personal and societal circumstances that Sears injected his poem about a midnight clear. It had been requested by a friend and neighboring pastor, William Parsons, and its imagery was most poignant. Especially the third stanza, which is not always included in hymnals, though it is in ours. “Yet though the woes of strife and sin,” wrote Sears, “the world has suffered long, beneath the angel strain have rolled two thousand years of wrong, and we through bitter wars, hear not, the love song which they bring: O hush the noise, and end the strife, to hear the angels sing.” It was, unfortunately, an honest appraisal of the world situation.

Sears, of course, does not end there, for his carol offers up a word of hope. A real, genuine word of hope. Whatever the case, his final stanza promises that though the world may be dark, the brightness of the angelic song stands out against the midnight sky to offer up a vision of a brighter, better day. “For lo, the days are hastening on, by prophet bards foretold, when with the ever-circling years comes ‘round the age of gold, when peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling, and the whole world send back the song which now the angels sing.”

When Sears spoke of those “prophet bards of old,” he may have been thinking of Isaiah, whose words we have encountered these past two weeks, or maybe he was thinking of John the Baptist, whose words ultimately speak of hope as well.

Much like Edward Sears, John also lived in a tumultuous. The nation of Israel was occupied by Rome. There had been previous attempts at revolution by the people, but time and again Rome had squashed their efforts. They were subject to high taxation, many of them forced into slavery when their debts could not be paid. It was a dark time, when along comes John.

He is cut from the same cloth as many of the Hebrew scripture prophets. “John,” writes one scholar, “is clearly described as a prophetic figure, speaking with a prophetic voice” (William Herzog, *Feasting on the Word*, A-1, 47)

John was a bit different from many of the Hebrew scripture prophets in terms of where he lived and what he wore, as earlier prophets often lived in urban settings, sometimes even in the courts of kings, and no doubt wore flowing robes. Matthew describes John though as a rather scruffy character, living on the outskirts of civilization, dressed in animal skins, and eating locusts and wild honey. But like his ancient predecessors, John was willing to confront those in power.

When the established authorities of Jerusalem come out to the Jordan River to see what all the commotion is about, he spares little in his critique of them. “You brood of vipers,” he shouts, “Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor.’” Don’t rest on your laurels. Don’t think you are more important than you are because of your heritage or your positions. It is your deeds, your actions that count, not your pedigree or position. For if you fail to bear good fruit, watch out! You will be cut down and tossed aside!

But to those who recognized their own failings, those who accepted baptism as a symbolic commitment to turn their lives around, to live a life devoted to loving and serving God and neighbor, to those folk, regardless of rank or privilege, John offered up hope. “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me.” And who is that one? The Messiah! The anointed one of God, who will bring the people who have walked in darkness into a great light. The one who will bring true and lasting peace on earth! Despite the way things look now, with Roman soldiers marching through every town, with tax collectors holding out their hands for more and more, with violence ever present, there is hope! For God has not forgotten our plight!

The other night my wife Linda and I were watching a medical drama that I follow. One of the cases being dealt with was a little girl with very serious brain injury that could not be treated surgically. There was an alternative treatment available, which while it was not nearly as successful in most instances as surgery, it did work some of the time.

The resident doctor explained the treatment to the mother of the injured child. The mother had been right at the child's side, and was very protective of her.

"Will it work?" asked the mother.

A medical student who was working with the doctor that day, jumped in and spoke up. "It only works about 25% of the time."

At which point the mother broke down, near hysteria. The resident doctor finally calmed her down, assuring her that they would do everything possible to help her daughter.

After they left the daughter's room, the resident took the medical student aside.

"What were you doing back there, you really upset that mother."

"I just told her the facts," said the student, "What she wanted was the truth."

The resident shook her head, "No," she said, "What she wanted was hope." (*Chicago Med*, NBC)

And isn't that true for all of us? What we want is hope. Because truth without hope is despair. But we do need to hear the truth. Because hope without truth is false hope. And while 25% isn't all the time, while there is no guarantee of success, it can be offered up in a way that offers hope, or it can be offered in a way that emphasizes the failure rate. We need both truth and hope.

John the Baptist understood that. So did Edward Sears. And if we are wise, so too will you and I. The world as they knew it was not perfect, at times far from it. John's listeners faced unfair taxation, foreign occupation, and many of them poverty. And who knows what untold personal issues and concerns: wayward children, diseases like leprosy, the grief of widowhood and on and on. Turn around, said John, face in a new direction--a direction marked by placing one's trust, one's hope, in God who shows us in the birth of them Messiah that love is already here. The capacity to set things right is already ours. Edward Sears knew the struggles of mental illness first hand, and like his fellow Americans he faced the challenges of his day: a disintegrating country, racked by the battle over slavery, the changing demographics, and a world constantly at war. He spoke of those truths in his most famous work, but he too held out hope. God's love and peace will indeed prevail in an "age of gold" when we human beings will indeed be able to "send back the song the angels sing," a day when we will be able to raise the melody of peace on earth, goodwill towards all.

And so to this day, this time. The truth is we live in difficult times, when elected leaders are caught in a struggle that puts so much on hold, when our climate is changing before our eyes,

when racial divides are far from resolved, when the poor are indeed still with us, when diseases remain uncured, hurricane ravaged cities and towns are still in ruins, and individual concerns and problems touch so many lives. That is truth.

But there is also hope, real hope, that when we are willing to place our trust, our faith, in the Messiah's way of love, these things can and will be addressed. When we learn from the one born in Bethlehem to truly love God, to truly love our neighbors, all our neighbors, when we learn to truly love ourselves, there can and will be peace on earth, goodwill towards all.

That's the truth. And that, my friends, is our hope.

Amen

John H. Danner