

**Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus...
From Our Fears and Sins Release Us**
Zephaniah 3:14-20; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

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This is from the introduction of Elaine Pagels' new memoir titled *Why Religion? A Personal Story*:

Many of us...have left religious institutions behind, and prefer to identify as "spiritual, not religious." I've done both—had faith, and lost it; joined groups, and left them. To my own surprise, I then went back, seeking to understand what happened, and to explore how the stories, poetry, music, and art that make up religious traditions ... sometimes still resonate. (p. xiv)

She went back to religion to understand what happened. Here's what happened. A brilliant, Harvard educated professor of religion met and married a brilliant physicist, Heinz Pagels. The religion professor is not the traditional professor of religion. She is a skeptic who believes or maybe a believer who is skeptical. She is a Christian who also draws from gnostic traditions, Buddhism, Judaism, American Indian traditions and others where she has found truth. She and Heinz had a son whom they named Mark. Her memoir takes the reader on the agonizing journey of their son's diagnosis with a rare lung disease and then his death at age six. It is a heartrending story told with theological insight and beauty. Right after Mark's death she writes, "I was astonished, seeming to sense that Mark was all right, wherever he was, and that he was *somewhere*. But that didn't change what we felt: utter desolation." (p. 88)

A year after their son died, the unimaginable occurred. Her husband was mountain climbing with another physicist in Castle Creek, Colorado. He slipped and fell 1,300 feet to his death. These are her words:

I remember nearly nothing: a black hole had opened up and swallowed our life. Other people were bustling around the house; who were they? ... Mute as a stone, I could neither speak nor cry. If I start to wail and weep, I thought, I'll never be able to stop. (p. 112)

Dr. Pagels' memoir is about how she answered the question, "Why religion?" She answers it brilliantly, and out of the darkness found hope again.

I've never told you this, but I often struggle with the sermons during Advent. We're preparing for Christmas. We hear Jingle Bells everywhere we go. Joy to the World. A Holly Jolly Christmas. Yet terrorists just struck a Christmas bazaar in France, killing three people and wounding thirteen. We cannot pretend that didn't happen. A little girl in south Alabama, nine years old, just took her own life because other children bullied her about her race. She was African American. We cannot pretend that didn't happen. Yet today we light a pink candle named "Joy." Do you feel the dissonance?

As I read and reread the birth narratives, I began to notice the prominence of nighttime. Have you ever noticed that? The early church chose to emphasize the fact that it was night when Jesus was born. The shepherds were keeping watch over their flocks *by night*. The wise men followed the star through *the night*. When Joseph was warned of Herod's murderous intentions, he took the baby Jesus and Mary *by night* and fled to Egypt. They were telling us that Jesus was born during a dark time, when hope was needed most.

Then there's that passage from an obscure Hebrew prophet named Zephaniah. Why Zephaniah? Most of us can't even find him in our Bible. Here's why: Zephaniah understood nighttime. If you know the history of the ancient Israelites, you know that they were forced into exile in a foreign land, something the Hebrew prophets interpreted as God's judgment upon the people. The worst-case scenario happened. In a series of three deportations, a foreign army invaded their land, destroyed the Temple, ransacked homes and vineyards, and forced the people of Israel into exile. Though the book of Zephaniah is short, it seems to have spanned a long time. It's only three chapters, but

scholars believe it covered the entire exile. The first chapter involves the time leading up to the exile. Zephaniah warned of God's impending judgment.

*The great day of the Lord is near,
Near and hastening fast;
The sound of the day of the Lord
Is bitter,
The warrior cries aloud there.*

*That day will be a day of wrath,
A day of distress and anguish,
A day of ruin and devastation,
A day of darkness and gloom,
A day of clouds and thick darkness....*

I cannot imagine a more ominous warning, but the people refused to heed Zephaniah's words.

Then in chapter two and part of chapter three, the people of Israel appear to be in exile. Zephaniah invited them to return to God and avoid more devastation.

*Seek the Lord, all you humble of
The land,
Who do his commands;
Seek righteousness, seek humility;
Perhaps you may be hidden
On the day of the Lord's wrath.*

Then near the end of chapter three the tone changes dramatically. The exile appears to be over. The darkness has lifted, and sounds of celebration are in the air, as the people returned to their land.

*Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion;
Shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your
Heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!*

Once every three years we read this story from Zephaniah on this Sunday, third Sunday of Advent. It is always coupled with this beautiful passage from Philippians 4:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

And then Luke 3, where John the Baptist “proclaimed the good news to the people.”

Do you see our message for today? The message is not that it is not dark outside. We’re not pretending. It is dark. In Strasbourg, France. In Demopolis, Alabama. Darkness is everywhere. *It always has been.* The message for today is that in the face of that darkness we nevertheless dare to light a pink candle named Joy, a candle that all the hosts of evil have not been able to quench, a light that darkness will never overcome. Our message is that Jesus was born in the nighttime, when hope is needed most.

“So why religion?” a brilliant, honest theologian asks. At age 75, reflecting upon the darkness of her own life, Dr. Pagles ends her memoir by quoting an ancient Jewish prayer: “Blessed art Thou, Lord God of the Universe, that you have brought us alive to this day.” Here’s the last sentence of the book: “However it happens, sometimes hearts *do* heal, through what I can only call grace.” (p. 211)

So come, thou long expected Jesus.... From our fears and sins release us.

Closing Prayer

Lord, how grateful we are for the light that shines in the darkness. How grateful we are for hope. Help us to claim it and share it. Amen.