

*As the Earth Brings Forth its Shoots*

When I was in college, I took a year-long class on the Second World War.

I'm not particularly a war history buff, but I knew the professor was a good one.

Spending a year studying the war brought out a sense of the scale of the calamity.

As we neared the end of the semester on the European Theater, our professor paused from his lecture, looked over the lectern and said to the class, "If you ever get the chance to visit the American Cemetery in Normandy at the D-Day beaches, don't miss it. Everyone should see it if they have the chance." And then he paused again, furrowed his brow and added, almost into the paper in front of him, "You'll cry."

I remembered his words as my brother and I were backpacking in Europe after college and we decided that we would travel to Bayeux on the train and rent a car to drive out the remaining few miles to the coast. Renting a car represented a considerable strain on the shoestring budget we had set for ourselves, so we were going to make the most of it. Our Let's Go guide instructed us that the best place to stay when we got there was a little hostel in the countryside called La Maison Famille.

A Canadian university student, who was also staying at la Maison, volunteered to pay for a third of the car rental if we would add a stop at the Canadian cemetery to our agenda the next day. We hadn't planned to go there, but money is money, and we were skint.

The next morning, we rented a hideous little Renault Twingo, a car whose sole distinction besides fuel economy seemed to be its utter lack of creature comfort. We folded ourselves in two, and shoehorned the three of us into this miniscule vehicle.

The American Cemetery in Normandy is, unsurprisingly, a somber place. The rows upon rows of white marble markers carry only names and dates. I stood there on the cliffs overlooking the pounding surf below with the wind ruffling my hair, and I *was* moved, deeply, but the tears my professor predicted didn't come.

Then we went to the Canadian cemetery.

It is very different. It is not as large, not by far, because the Canadian casualties sustained on D-Day were not as numerous. It is almost a study in contrasts to the American Cemetery. Rather than being perched on the cliff overlooking the shore, it is deep in the rolling Norman countryside. It is more like going to the graveyard of an old country church than a national cemetery. There is a fieldstone wall surrounding the cemetery, trees overhanging the markers, and flowers growing, wildflowers, it would seem, except they are bit too well manicured to be truly wild. But more than anything, what distinguished the Canadian cemetery was the markers. They too, were uniform in size and shape, making no distinction for rank or class. But where our sober American markers contained only the names, the Canadian markers were carved with words clearly chosen by the

families who had loved their sons, husbands, fathers and brothers. Words like *Beloved Son. Gone but not Forgotten. Our Help is in the Name of the Lord. We look for the Life to Come.* It was reading these stones when the tears finally spilled out over my cheeks.

These stones carried on them remembrances and hope. Much as the stones put a human face on that war, so also Isaiah's prophecy puts a human face on the suffering of the Israelites, as he writes words filled with *memory* and *hope*.

The chapters of book of the prophet Isaiah are grounded in remembrances of what had been, remembrances of life before the fall of the city: childhood, childbirth, love, fights and laughter, remembrances of what had been, and hope for what could be. Isaiah's words speak to hope for redemption in death, hope for redemption for the world, hope for the life that is to come.

It is a very biblical idea, that remembrance and hope are tied together. Grounded in the history of the suffering of his people, the prophet recalls the deeds God has done, giving thanks, giving praises, remembering who God is and who God will be toward the people. As we come to the 61<sup>st</sup> chapter of Isaiah, the people have returned to their homes after a traumatic period of enslavement in a foreign land.

Their captivity has ended, but to what have they returned?

They have returned to find that those who were left to maintain hope have, in some measure, given up.

Perhaps even worse still, those who stayed behind have married their captors and had families, and so there will be a constant reminder of what has been.

God's temple was destroyed.

Their communities were laid waste.

And yet, even the midst of the rubble, Isaiah points them to remembrances of what God has done in their past that stand as shoots of hope. Remembering who God is forms the basis of the hope that will be needed to sustain the remnant of the people in rebuilding their nation.

In remembering who God is, the people are given a vision of what can be. It is, in the words of Katharine Sakenfeld, "A memory of the future."

That of course, is what we do in Advent as well. As we wait for Jesus' birth, we have no delusions that we don't know already the end of the story, because we do.

We know how God acted, how Jesus was born of Mary, lived among us; was crucified, dead and buried, and the third day arose again from the dead.

We remember it, and it is the basis for our hope.

It is a memory of the future.

We seek this remembrance, year in and year out, so that we might remind ourselves of the God in whom we hope.

It is good to remember who God is, because life can be a fickle witness to God's nature.

It is no wonder that when the theologians of the twentieth century surveyed what our wars had wrought, they found the vision of the perfectibility of humankind of much nineteenth century theology to be bankrupt of meaning. In order to find a vision of hope, they had to dig much deeper. They returned to the Bible in order to *remember* what God had done.

Marilynne Robinson's gorgeous novel Gilead is the correspondence between John Ames, an aging Congregationalist minister living in a small Iowa town, and his seven-year-old son. Like the prophet Isaiah, Ames sees in his story the grace of God because he has taken a long view of his life that shows God's goodness throughout it.

In a poignant passage, Ames describes a conflict between his father and grandfather over his grandfather's vision of salvation. As a young man, his grandfather experienced a vision of Christ in chains and it had compelled him to become an abolitionist, fighting against the institution of slavery, and as a young preacher preached men into the civil war. His young son, Ames's father, witnessed it all, remembering the way his father would begin service by riding up to the church door, shooting his gun in the air to signal that he had arrived and proceed to preach up a storm of obligation and refining fire that induced the congregation to sacrifice their lives for the freedom of others. Ames's father, then, became an ardent pacifist, sitting on Sundays at the Quaker meeting rather than going to his father's church. Reflecting on their rocky relationship, he recalls,

"My father spoke once in a sermon about how he regretted the times after the war that he'd gone off to sit with the Quakers while his father struggled to find words of comfort to say to his remnant of a flock. He said in those days his father opened all the windows that would still open, so they could hear the Methodists singing by the river, and that some of the women would join in if the song was 'The Old Rugged Cross; or 'Rock of Ages,' even in the middle of the sermon, and he'd just stop preaching and listen to them. The wind he said, smelled like turned earth because of the new graves, and yet people afterward remembered those Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings as something strangely wonderful. There was a tenderness in the way they spoke about them."<sup>1</sup>

It is just such a tenderness we find in the words of God to the hurting people in Isaiah's prophecy. The mourners will be comforted. As surely as the earth brings forth its shoots, so too will God bring redemption to God's people.

It's *redemption* that brings tenderness to the remembrance of pain. It's redemption that enables us to look back, or even ahead, with the assurance that the Lord is near. It's redemption that turns our remembrances into hope, indeed, even into *joy*.

We are not speaking of a giddy happiness, no, we are speaking of a rejoicing from a place of deep hope. It's the rejoicing of those who know what the future holds, even while they live in an uncertain present.

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<sup>1</sup> Robinson, Marilynne. Gilead. P100.

It is the sort of rejoicing that Paul admonishes from the Thessalonians – not a rejoicing that ignores their present calamity, but one that is grounded in a memory of the future of what God *has* done and God will *yet* do.

From a purely tangible standpoint, this year has tugged at our need for hope.

As we wait this year, our hopeful waiting is tinged with more than our theological claims. We wait in hope that we will weather the storm of the pandemic without too much loss. We wait in hope for jobs to return. We wait in hope for a vaccine, even as we fear what the next months may bring.

But, this year, as every year, we do not wait as those with no knowledge of what is coming. We remember our future, what we have heard, and felt, and tasted. We remember our future, that the Lord is coming.

We remember that we have learned that the Lord is good through *years* of seeing what God has done.

We remember our future.

Which I suppose is the heart of advent: the memory that the Lord is coming. The memory, that again, the angels will bring good tidings of great joy that is for all people, that born to us this day in the city of David is a savior, who is Christ the Lord.

The story we keep yearning to tell, and hear, and feel and taste and remember, is that God is good, and God loves us, and as surely as the earth brings forth its shoots, God is with us.

God is preparing our future.

And so we wait, not in a cozy advent, resigned as Wordsworth wrote,

*With heart as calm as lakes that sleep,  
In frosty moonlight glistening;  
Or mountain rivers, where they creep  
Along a channel smooth and deep,  
To their own far-off murmurs listening.*<sup>2</sup>

No, no, no, we remember that God came to us when we could not go to God.

We remember the future that God still holds for us: a future filled with good news for the oppressed, broken hearts bound up, liberty for captives, release to the prisoners, and comfort for those who mourn.

*As the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> William Wordsworth, *Memory*