

An Auspicious Start

An oft-repeated quote attributed to Karl Barth is that Christians – and preachers in particular – should read their bibles and read their newspapers, and interpret the newspapers from the Bible.

I myself have quoted it, and since I wanted to be sure I got it right, I checked it out. It turns out that there's no record of him ever saying it. But he did say this: "The Pastor and the Faithful should not deceive themselves into thinking that they are a religious society, which has to do with *certain* themes; they live in the *world*. We still need - according to my old formulation - the Bible and the Newspaper."

I sort of like that version better because I do have a certain aversion to seeing sermons turned into current events reports. But it cuts the other way too. We don't exercise faith divorced from the rest of life. We can't.

When I lived down south, I could always find a particular televangelist who likes to interpret world events through a doomsday cult lens. I know full well it's wrong for me to be entertained by anyone's bad theology, but this fellow – I'll leave him and his wife nameless, ask me offline and I'll tell you – can cram anything into an apocalyptic interpretation.

He's certainly interpreting his newspaper through his bible, but is he getting it right?

I think that's the struggle that many Christians today have when it comes to looking at life through the lens of faith. We know that there's something going on that needs redemption, but we're worried we'll get it wrong.

There can't be any doubt that there are things going on that cry out for redemption.

Did you hear the statistic Kay cited last week about gun violence victims here in Philadelphia? Over 2000 this year.

I'm sure we have many opinions about the solution, I accept that, but surely we should talk about something like that from the vantage point of faith?

Philabundance was bilked out of nearly a million dollars by a scam artist, which sort of puts the gift cards that scammers ask you to buy for me in perspective. We heard about it. Our Mission committee allocated money on our behalf. That right there is holding faith and a newspaper together.

But we know there will be more need. It's advent. We worship Jesus Christ.

What do we do, and how do we get it right?

What's more, leaving aside social illnesses, even without a pandemic, it's not a wonderful season for everyone. We'll gather virtually tonight for a service for the longest night because not everyone goes through December feeling *joyful*, even in the best of years.

Folks are recovering from divorces and bereavements and all manner of brokenness. We stop every Session meeting midway through for prayers, and there's not a meeting when we don't have a long list of people to pray for.

There's a lot of redemption needed in the world, isn't there?

It is hard sometimes to know how to interpret the newspaper through the Bible, though, isn't it?

There is so much going on in the world sometimes and it isn't always very nice. In fact, it is frequently not nice at all.

Life sometimes seems like a great big old load of challenges and it feels a far cry from the wonderment of Mary's reply to the angel, "Let it be with me according to your word."

The world seems to be a very different place from the world of the annunciation, doesn't it?

But it's not really, not if we're honest about it, is it?

I cannot imagine the prospects of an unwed mother in first century Nazareth were all that good, and the question then is the same as the question now, and it's not so much about bibles and newspapers as it is, *how do we encounter life through the lens of faith?*

The answer to that fundamental question, then as now, lies with *redemption and hope*.

One of my favorite stories by Anne Lamott is from about twenty years ago. It's called *Barn Raising*.

In it, she talks about a family with a seriously ill child, a daughter named Olivia with Cystic Fibrosis.

It is an exquisitely beautiful but, nonetheless, *painful* essay where she tells the story of her community's care for this family using the imagery of an Amish Barn Raising. Together they loved this family with tangible and practical help. She writes,

"I saw that the people who loved them could, by showing up, build a marvelous barn of sorts around the family.

So we did. We raised a gigantic amount of money; tragedies so often require money, too. We showed up and sometimes we cleaned, we listened, some of us gave massages, some of us took care of the children, and we walked their dog and we cried and then made them laugh; we gave them a lot of privacy and we showed up and listened and let them cry and cry and cry, and then took them for hikes. We took the kids to the park. We took the mother to the movies. I took the father out for dinner one night right after the diagnosis. He was a mess. The first time the waiter came over, the father was wracked with sobs, and the second time the waiter came over, the father was laughing hysterically. "He's a little erratic, isn't he?" I smiled to the waiter, and he nodded gravely.

We all kept cooking, and walking the dog, and even when things got really bad and scary, we still showed up. And that is how we built our Amish barn."¹

¹ Anne Lamott, *Barn Raising* from *Salon*, TUESDAY, OCT 8, 1996

Isn't that the truth? I've seen that lived out over and over and over again.

When you need to interpret life through faith, it is often helpful to start by doing something for somebody.

You see, we are all in this thing together. That's what it means to be human, to be created with the capacity to be together, and together to work for redemption and hope.

God didn't just plop us down here to be sponges – there's work for us to do.

I love the image of hope that we're given by Saint Augustine; you've probably heard it. "Hope has two beautiful daughters; their names are Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see that they do not remain as they are."

That is the heart of the promise of God that comes at the auspicious start of the Gospel when the angel Gabriel shows up to have a bed-side conversation with Mary.

There's a line of reasoning that says that when an angel of the Lord shows up and says, "Be not afraid," you should probably be *very* afraid.

But maybe that's not so if you're in need of some redemption and hope.

If you're in need of some redemption and hope, an angel of the Lord might just bring some very welcome news.

An angel of the Lord might just be bringing good news into this world that needs redemption and hope, to *this* world struggling to keep enough anger and courage to work together for redemption in all the broken places, wherever there is violence and tragedy, racism and bigotry.

Into this world where we're all called to live together and work together for redemption, into *this* world, the news of the angel is that *God* is coming.

The world of Mary that the angel Gabriel visited isn't so different from the world with all its madness and wonder that we inhabit today.

The world has always been a place where good and terrible things can happen. The world has always been a place where human beings, at our best, at our most human, come at this thing and know that we're all in it together.

And Gabriel's news is of *Immanuel*: God is in this thing with us. Gabriel's word is of a miracle, We're all in this world together and God is in this world with us.

Gabriel comes and makes his announcement, and the last words he says to Mary before he departs are some of the most important ever uttered in scripture, "For with God, nothing will be impossible."

These words are a creed. They go back to the very beginning of God's story with Israel, these very words were spoken to Abraham and Sarah.²

They are the heart of the covenant that God makes with us: With God, nothing is impossible.

² For more, read [Luke](#) in *Interpretation*, by Fred Craddock.

At the end of Anne Lamott's *Barn Raising* she writes, "We stood outside for a while longer, talking about this last flare-up, how frightened she felt, how tired. And I didn't know what to say at first, watching the girl go chasing after the big kids, coughing; except that we, their friends, all know the rains and the wind will come, and they will be cold, oh God will they be cold. But then we will come too, I said; and there will be shelter."³

We truly are at our best - our most human - when we are together – not just physically, as we all want to be now, but emotional, spiritually *together*, working for redemption and hope, and the message of the Gospel for us now is that God has been working on this *for* us and *with* us all along.

When we work for redemption and hope, we're just plugging in to what God is already doing.

If we're truly looking for the way to engage life through the lens of faith, to see the newspaper through our Bibles, then we are looking at the troubles of the world knowing that God has called us into this life together and God is in this life with us.

So, let me end with one final bit from Anne Lamott, her own reflections twenty years later about that essay and what it has come to mean:

"I have hope. It is not based on circumstances. It's based on paying attention. At this same tiny bookstore, thirty years ago, I got to have tea with Wendell Berry, who was signing his books there in a mid-December storm. He looked out the window and said, "It gets darker and darker and darker; and then baby Jesus is born."

I read the people who were at the Depot last night the story from Small Victories called "Barn Raising," from 20 years ago, when the two-year-old sister of Sam's kindergarten fiancée, named Olivia, was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis. It was the end of the world, and I told the story of how her parents' friends and I built an Amish barn around them, of love, and time, money and casseroles, childcare and chocolate, so that there would always be shelter.

THEN I got to tell everyone about the book Olivia and I have been working on together, because she is not only still here--she is healing. She went to college, and she's changing the world.

So yeah, I have hope.

Emily Dickinson said that hope causes the Good to reveal itself. So bring it on. When I bring people hope--cups of tea, poetry and art supplies--then I'm holding hope in my hands, but I can only receive it by giving it away, to you, and to me; to us. Here, have some; it's on me. Just don't give up before you get the miracle."⁴

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

³ Ibid.

⁴ Anne Lamott on Facebook, 12/16/14