

“A Convergence of Hope”  
Malachi 4:1-2/Luke 1:67-79

It happens tomorrow. As many of you know, December 21 marks the winter solstice. In the language of astronomy, that is when the Earth tilts as far from the sun as it ever does over the course of twelve months. In practical terms, it is when people in the northern hemisphere experience the least sunlight of any day. Put differently, it is the longest night. In addition, this solstice offers an opportunity for humans to see a heavenly event last witnessed 800 years ago.

Just after Monday’s sunset, Jupiter and Saturn will seem so close in the southwestern sky that they will appear to be a double planet. Every twenty year or so, their orbits look close when viewed from Earth, but tomorrow’s event is called a Great Convergence as those heavenly bodies will seem to be separated by only 1/5 of the moon’s diameter. In reality, they will still be 450,000 million miles away from the other, yet to our eyes will appear to be almost one.

They were last that close in 1623, but on that day passed in front of the sun and were unseen from Earth. Thus, the most recent time it was visible to humans was March 4, 1226. Given the timing of this conjunction, some are also referring to tomorrow’s event as the Christmas Star, a term that may have originated with 17<sup>th</sup> century astronomer Johannes Kepler. He had witnessed a Great Convergence of two planets accompanied by a solar explosion and wondered if a similar event had been the star that led the wise men to the manger in Bethlehem. The keepers of such records note that a triple convergence happened in 6 B.C., but the planets were ten times farther apart than they will be tomorrow. Thus, assuming clear skies, we will see a light none of us has witnessed before. (citation below). A celestial event that makes for a convergence of a different kind with our Advent journey.

During these weeks, we have focused on less familiar names for Jesus as found in the seasonal hymn “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” Today, we ponder its sixth verse: “O Come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer our spirits by thine advent here; disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death’s dark shadows put to flight.” As we have heard in other verses, so does this one speak of the primary purpose for Jesus coming to Earth; namely, our salvation and breaking forever the power of death. Yet this line offers an image of him as Dayspring, too, something I hear anticipated by a joyful father of long ago who exclaimed, “By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us.”

With those words, a first century Jewish priest named Zechariah winds down his song of praise. It came on a day when an infant the world would soon know as John the Baptist received his name. Zechariah had learned from an angel that Elizabeth and he would finally become parents and that he was to name the child John. When that priest voiced doubt given their ages, he was left unable to speak for the entire pregnancy. Just prior to our text, at the naming ceremony, Zechariah confirmed in writing that the child was to be called John, and instantly his tongue was freed. Our passage records his words of praise in a hymn known as the Benedictus.

Zechariah starts by giving thanks for how the impending gift of a Savior reveals God’s favor that we might “serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness.” He celebrates how his own flesh and blood will prepare the way for the Lord and then closes with a message of hope. “By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

His words echo the anticipation heard in our Old Testament reading, when five centuries earlier the prophet Malachi had spoken of a future when all hardship would end. Malachi knew that such a day had not yet arrived and instead spoke of a time to come when “the sun of

righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings.” The winged sun-disk was a common motif in ancient near Eastern art; a symbol for divine mercy. That promise is echoed in today’s closing hymn when we will sing “Light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings.”

“Light and life...sun of righteous...dawn from on high...Dayspring.” Each word or phrase names the promise that we find in Christ. To be sure, the light of the world came to earth in the first century in a form of a baby and in a few days we will celebrate his birth again. Yet that priest reminds us Jesus’ birth did not forever push away all darkness. Instead, Zechariah seemed to anticipate one who would visit and look upon humankind continually; a light that lifts the shadow of death and shows the way of peace in unceasing fashion.

We need to claim that hope again as this year winds down. 2020 will be remembered for many things. It brought a pandemic that upended work, school and community, taking the lives of 1.7 million people to-date. Protests over racial injustice arose in the same months, bringing to public awareness the challenges still faced by people of color in our country. An election revealed anew the divisions in our land and the huge task for our President-elect. And while all of that was going on, as a faith community we were able to gather inside just once since March, as first Easter and soon Christmas will be remembered as online times of worship only. It’s been a painful year by any standard and yet there are signs of Dayspring all around.

As the approval of two vaccines and the start of inoculations holds the promise that soon we will turn the corner. Life has settled into online and remote rhythms that are different from what we knew before, but have brought blessings we would have missed. The racial unrest has started important conversations in a variety of settings that offer a glimmer of hope that this time can be different. Elected officials in Washington seem to have found a way to compromise that will soon bring more help to hurting neighbors. And while all of that has been happening, we have received glimpses of Dayspring as people of faith, too. Let me show you just a few. (video)

“The dawn from on high will break upon us,” Zechariah said “to guide our feet into the way of peace.” We are not there yet. One does not need to look far to see evidence of places where darkness still exists and peace has not come. Such a reality does not mean the hope articulated by a priest and prophet of the past was in vain. Yet it does mean that as this season of Advent winds down we wait for it all to come together, trusting that in God’s providence, it will.

In speaking about tomorrow’s planetary event, Rice University astronomer Patrick Hartigan notes that while such a view has not happened in 800 years, it will occur again in March of 2080. Thus, he points out a special opportunity for families. Parents can show the conjunction to their kids Hartigan suggests and say, “60 years from now, when I’m long gone...go out in the morning sky and look at this conjunction, and think of me.” Amy Oliver, spokeswoman for the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics added it might be especially good timing for this year. “Call [the convergence] a unique holiday gift to the world,” she said. “Maybe it’s the soothing band-aid for 2020.” (Grantham-Philips, Wyatt “Worlds align for a rare ‘Christmas Star,’ Look for Jupiter, Saturn in December skies.” *USA Today*, 12/7/20)

May it be so for you and me and all creation, bringing about a convergence of hope that allows us to declare with a believer of long ago: “By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us.”