



“Who is this Messiah: Prince of Peace”

Luke 1:68-79

December 6, 2020

In the year 2000, Stuart Manley, a used-book store owner in Northumberland, England, was sorting through a crate of books he purchased at auction. A colorful piece of folded paper at the bottom of the box caught his eye. He unfolded it to find a bright red poster, with the crown of King George VI at the top and below it bold, bright letters that read: *“Keep Calm and Carry On.”*

Manley liked the poster and so he framed it and hung it by the cash register. Looking into the poster’s origins, he discovered that it was created in 1939 by the British Ministry of Information, just prior to the Blitz, when Nazi planes flew over Great Britain every night for two months bombing London and the surrounding areas. The world had never seen anything like it: nightly air raid sirens, citizens taking shelter in basements and subway stations, unbelievable noise and explosions, fires and destruction, daily death counts reported in the news. The British people were understandably terrified. In preparation for expected attacks, the government created the posters, more than two million of them, portraying the strong resolve that undergirded Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s leadership in crisis.

But the posters were never distributed. Soon after the war they were almost all destroyed. Six decades later, in Manley’s bookshop, people began to ask about the eye-catching poster. So he had it reproduced, and the rest is history. The original slogan and hundreds of creative variations have become universally recognized not just in Great Britain but around the world. My personal favorite this year is “Keep Calm...and Wash Your Hands.”

In an interview back in 2009, Mary Manley, Stuart’s wife, said, “Its message is so simple, so clear,

so without spin—‘Keep Calm and Carry On’ has turned out to have meaning not just for a single people in a time of trouble, but for all of us, wherever we live, whatever our troubles.”ⁱ

What is that meaning? Keep Calm and Carry On—it’s a statement of persistence in the face of tremendous adversity. It holds a defiant hope that better days are coming *and* a clear charge to hold on in the meantime. It’s a message tailor-made for the second Sunday in the season of Advent in this year of unexpected crises that have tested us all and revealed so much of our shared humanity and vulnerability.

Advent is not a lengthy season on the liturgical calendar. Soon, we will hear the angel choirs, we’ll see the blinding light of a brilliant star, we’ll feel a thrill of hope in the rejoicing of a weary world. The trumpets will sound. Even the powerful king will shudder nervously on his throne. But this morning we remember that this story is introduced not with fanfare or applause, but with simple hymns about persistent waiting and dogged watching. It is the story of an aging couple, Elizabeth and Zechariah, who are living in the quiet rural hill country outside of Jerusalem two millennia ago.

Zechariah and Elizabeth are getting on in years. They are part of a priestly family and Zechariah himself is a priest, probably responsible for a small chapel in their village. Once a year, with a group of priests, Zechariah makes his way to Jerusalem to serve in the Temple. And, on this particular occasion, he is chosen to be the one to enter the Holy of Holies and light the incense. It is the honor of a lifetime. But while he’s in there, something happens: a vision, a mystical experience, an angel. The angel has a command and an announcement. Zechariah

is terrified, of course. “Do not be afraid,” the angel commands. “Elizabeth will conceive and bear a son; name him John.” “How in the world is that supposed to happen?” Zechariah asks. “We’re both old; well beyond that.”

And the angel who identifies himself as Gabriel, responds to Zechariah with a kind of punishment that is also a gift. For Zechariah’s deficit of imaginative hope and trust, the old priest is relieved of his speaking ability until the baby is born. Zechariah is given nine months of silent reflection. He is forced to keep calm and carry on, even as he watches Elizabeth bear the child whom the angel promised. It must have been an interesting time in their household, silent and watchful waiting...a time of preparation for the coming of an unexpected gift.

Zechariah silently prepares and when the child is born, he speaks. He names his son John, and then the aging priest finds his voice. The first words out of his mouth are the words we just heard. They are a kind of joyful poem; the birth of a child turns fathers into poets. The church has loved his poem for two thousand years.

This week, as I’ve read and meditated on Zechariah’s inspired words, it has occurred to me that they are more than a description of what God has done. According to one reader “Zechariah’s prophecy hints at things to come, while reflecting refrains from long before.” A hymn, yes, a prayer, a song of grateful praise. But the words move off the page and into the story that lies ahead, quietly heralding the dawn of a brighter day. The church has given a title to these spontaneous verses. *Benedictus*, in Latin, is taken from the first word Zechariah speaks. ***Blessed***.

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people.

Zechariah breaks his long silence with words of blessing. He has convinced me that the language of blessing is what we need most this year. Zechariah knows that blessing is how we humans mark sacred moments and acknowledge the presence of God in

our midst when we are most tempted to miss that gift. Holding that newborn baby, a miraculous gift he never imagined he’d received, Zechariah sees the favor of God. He blesses the child and then he looks out across the generations to scattered souls virtually gathered in a time of crisis, and he blesses us too.

Words of blessing are so powerful because they are grounded in certainty. In biblical terms, the blessing of God is irrevocable, unconditional, eternal. It is the promise that holds when all else is shaken loose, the promise that God will act in saving mercy. This is the good news that Zechariah proclaims. But God’s blessing is not an object to be possessed or a commodity to hoard. The wonder of a blessing is that it multiplies *only* when it is shared. Kept to ourselves, the blessing rots in our hands. Offered to another, it is magnified. We are blessed in order to bless others with that same certainty of God’s tender mercy and light.

Among the many gifts of ministry, few mean more than the privilege of offering God’s blessing, whether in times of grief and pain or moments of joyful celebration. Still, I must admit that the most memorable blessings of my life have not been the ones I have given but those I have received. Among them a moment I will never forget, the day I was installed here at Second two years ago when our son Samuel made the sign of the cross on my forehead—“Bless you, Daddy.” That day of joyful celebration was a gift in so many ways. But that, that was the moment of pure blessing. Since it’s just us this morning, I’ll be a bit vulnerable. I’ve returned to that blessing often in this year when the pressure has mounted and the pathways are unclear and the accumulated grief sits like a boulder on my shoulders. Bless you, Daddy. God’s strength is enough. Keep calm. Carry on.

Zechariah cannot know what awaits his son. The crises he will encounter and the pain he will feel. But he can trust God. You, child, will be called prophet of the Most High. The dawn will break upon us...light to those who sit in the shadow of death, guiding our feet into the way of peace.

Peace. It's the last word of this poetic proclamation. I believe it was the word that kept returning to Zechariah in those months of silent meditation. What does humankind most need? What gift does God most long to give us? What word of blessing has the power to transform and inspire us? Guide our feet in the way of peace. A promise, a prayer, a blessing, a charge.

Long before Zechariah the priest, the Prophet Isaiah spoke of the coming Messiah as the one who would be called Prince of Peace, whose kingdom would be a place of safety for all, where enemies would live in harmony and peace would know no end. We who walk by faith can be certain that this kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven. Peace will come. Until that day, we move our feet toward it. We choose to live in the anticipation of that coming kingdom even as we wait for its arrival.

How? Through *Benedictus*. We make our way toward God's realm one blessing at a time. We who know the ultimate blessing of salvation have also been commanded to extend mercy and compassion to others. That is our call this Advent season. To move beyond the arrogance of self-centeredness and share the light. To bless *others* even if that means a little discomfort or disappointment on our part. Remember, blessing multiplies *only* when it is shared.

Zechariah's song suggests that we have a choice about how we will wait in the midst of crisis. He commends the way of holiness, even sacrificial love. I think of those saints among us who rise every day and make their way into hospital rooms, nursing homes, intensive care units. I think of the tireless efforts of those who serve in our Food Pantry, ensuring that our neighbors have enough to eat.

No fanfare. No trumpet blasts. Just sacrificial love giving testimony of the light to those who sit in the shadow of death. In their acts, I see the breaking dawn. I feel the call of faith to join in that effort.

Each year, I am moved and challenged by a powerful poem written by the great theologian Howard Thurman, titled "The Work of Christmas."

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among others,
To make music in the heart.

This Advent season, here's one more variation:
Keep Calm and Carry On...the work of Christmas.
Amen.

ⁱ *The Chicago Tribune*, March 21, 2009.