

When Half Spent Was the Night: Preaching Hope in the New Millennium

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Geneva Press, Louisville, Kentucky

As the clock ticks toward the new millennium, many Americans are poised on tiptoe for a seismic shift in the ages, a momentous grinding of the temporal tectonic plates. Christian youth have been summoned on the very eve of the new epoch to a sports dome in Indianapolis for an excited countdown. Secular types, ready to party the night away, are stocking up on champagne and reserving tables at the Rainbow Room, while others, fearing the end of the world or, at best, a Y2K apocalypse, are cashing out their T-bills, storing up tinned meats and kerosene, and lubricating portable generators. In any case, there is the hunch that this is no ordinary turning of the calendral wheel, and there is the decided sense that we are on the cusp of the ages, that something fearsome or fantastic, dire or delightful — but surely breathtakingly significant — is about to happen.

Down deep, however, many of us fear just the opposite. Even for people of faith — or perhaps especially for people of faith — the changing of the millennial guard is a pointed public reminder of the general spiritual listlessness that has settled in on our culture, namely the apprehension that, millennium or no millennium, nothing much of a dramatic cosmic character seems to be happening out there. We've been preaching the gospel for two thousand years now, and the world creaks on, an endless march of days, one damned thing after another, the swords-into-plowshares promises we proclaim in our pulpits as yet unfulfilled, the Alpha long forgotten and no Omega in sight. A thousand years ago, some of the faithful may have tromped up Zion's hill in a lathered millennial froth, but only the Christian militia, the lunatic fringe, and a few fevered preachers from the right side of the AM dial will do so this time around.

What has happened to mute our millennial fervor? We have gotten more savvy about calenders, for one thing. Only that portion of the world marching in step with the Christian West anticipates a new millennium, and what is the real date anyway, January 1, 2000 or 2001? Moreover, given that scholars now tag the birth of Jesus around 4 B.C., did we let the Big Day creep by unnoticed in 1996 while we were watching Florida State beat Notre Dame in the Orange Bowl? (The fact that the date is a moving target, indicating the artificiality of the whole idea of a millennium reminds me of what may be the most anti-climactic New Year's Eve shout ever uttered. As a group of us revelers watched the televised picture of the ball dropping in Times Square and listened to Dick Clark count backwards, at the stroke of midnight a party guest raised his glass and exclaimed, "It's 1990 in our time zone!" Similarly, perhaps we can soon shout, "It's a new millennium for that portion of the world using the Gregorian calendar!").

But most of all, our cultural expectations have faded for divine intervention on the large scale, and our spirituality has turned inward and psychological. Whatever else the biblical images of the shifting of the ages have going for them, they are surely outward, massive, and public. The powers of the heavens shake, the Son of Man comes on a cloud of great glory for all creation to see (Luke 21:26-27). But most in our culture

have long ago relaxed any anticipation of something so public as the redemption of the world, content instead with private bursts of placidness, episodes of inner illumination. "In the year that King Uzziah died," Isaiah saw the Lord, high and lofty, but "in the year after Frank Sinatra died," there seem to be more spiritual spas, synthesizers, and sharing groups than epiphanies in our sanctuaries.

Ironically, then, the challenge of preaching the hope of the Christian gospel at the beginning of the new millennium will not be a matter of helping people make sense of the pyrotechnic changes of a new eon, but of yet again accounting for the possibility of hopeful faith in a world where nothing much, outside one's lonely psyche, seems to change, a world where, in the view of many, millennium after millennium, for all of our technological progress, there is nothing new about the human prospect under the sun. In the New Testament, famine, strife, wars and rumors of wars are understood to be "birthpangs," disturbing to be sure, but inescapable signs of the nearness of God's redemption, cosmic divine salvation struggling itself into being. Today, though, not many see the suffering in Bosnia, the killings on Rwanda, or the bombing of Iraq as "birthpangs." They are more likely viewed simply as headlines in an endless loop of history, today's wars and rumors of wars to be followed inevitably by tomorrow's and the next day's.

Christian Hope and Its Counterfeits

In regard to the hope promised in Jesus Christ, the task of preachers in the years to come will be to thread the needle between this weary despair and cynicism, on the one hand, and the compensatory Pat Robertsonsque rhetoric of Christian bravado, on the other. In order to do so, we need to distinguish hope, as a doctrine and a virtue, from three other qualities often confused with hope: *positivism*, *optimism*, and *blind faith*.

Positivism (and its spiritual bedfellows: positive thinking and self-esteem) is a form of self-confidence based upon a conviction of strengths displayed in the past and still possessed in the present. A quarterback who has demonstrated pinpoint accuracy in the last six passes thinks positively about his ability to hit the wide receiver this time, too. A high-wire CEO who has turned around two struggling corporations is confident about his skills to work the same magic in the next one. *Optimism* represents a shift on the spectrum more toward the future, since it is based on an assessment of forces not yet assembled but in the process of gathering. A stock broker who perceives a turning in certain leading economic indicators becomes optimistic, even though the market may currently be in a long down phase. A physician who discerns the signs that her patient is rallying becomes optimistic, even though the patient is presently still quite ill. Thus, while optimism wagers on the future and looks to the future for validation, it is in reality based, no less than positivism, upon powers already there, perceived in the circumstances at hand. *Blind faith*, on the other hand, is based upon neither the past nor the present; indeed, it is founded upon nothing but wishful thinking, a naive, perhaps childish dream that the future will work out just fine.

We can see how easily these three qualities are mistaken for true hope, indeed, how they often masquerade as hope in the pulpit. Authentic Christian hope can sound somewhat like blind faith since it, too, believes that in Christ "all things hold together" (Col. 1:17) and that nothing will ultimately "be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38). But Christian hope is not blind. It has seen God keep promises in the past, witnessed the trustworthiness of God, most clearly in the

resurrection. In fact, part of the purpose of preaching is to continue the unbroken testimony of witness to what has been done throughout all human history.

Authentic Christian hope may also sound like positivism or like optimism, since it points in part to something here and now, to a dynamic in our present circumstances: the loving action of God in our life, a “very present help.” The difference is that positivism and optimism predict what will happen in the future based on indicators and forces in the present. Christians, by contrast, do not add up the strengths and assets of the present (even the divine ones) and then predict on that basis what will inevitably occur in the future. This is why church school lessons about faith and hope involving seeds in cups or caterpillars in cocoons finally miss the mark. This is also why Christian hope seems foolish and unrealistic, so easily crushed underfoot by the unrelenting march of history, since it is based upon what is promised rather than what is at hand. As Christopher Lasch has stated, “Hope implies a deep-seated trust in life that appears absurd to those who lack it.”¹ In fact, when Christians gather at a graveside and announce hope in the resurrection, it is precisely counter to all possibilities latent in the present tense. Christians cannot lay the cards on the table and predict how the hand will play out; they admit that they do not know what the future holds. Will peace talks succeed or collapse? Will a child struggling with leukemia live or die? Will God’s agents for justice in the world pass away in the celebrated blessedness of old age, like Mother Teresa, or perish in their youth at the hands of an assassin, like Martin Luther King? We simply do not know. Our hope is based, rather, on the promise that, whatever the future may hold, God is, in ways often hidden, shaping all human life redemptively and bringing all things to fulfillment in Christ. Christian hope is based on the conviction that the God who has loved us and saved us in the past will give us grace sufficient for the present and continue to be our savior in the future. In short, Christians do not believe, on the basis of the evidence, in progress; rather, we believe, against much of the evidence, in a God who keeps promises. Theologian Christopher Morse has stated the decisive point this way: *The difference between seeing eschatological testimony as a promise of the future rather than as a prediction of the future is that in a promise someone has made a commitment to you.*²

In his fine new book *Why Christian?*, Douglas John Hall engages in a series of dialogues with an imagined conversation partner, someone who is “on the edge of faith.” The final conversation in the book addresses the idea of hope, which leads Hall to the question of resurrection. He carefully distinguishes the idea of resurrection from immortality. “Immortality,” he says, “implies that the stuff of deathlessness lies in ourselves — in our ‘immortal souls.’” Resurrection, by contrast, is “not natural” and “is wholly dependent upon the faithfulness, forbearance, and love of God.” Having stated this, Hall, now in his seventies, makes a personal confession of hopeful faith:

And just for that reason...I am able, usually, to sleep at night, to continue playing the piano and writing yellow words and taking my aging body more or less for granted “in the meantime.” Because the thing of which I can be at all confident when I think of my own “not being” is that God will be. I am not so presumptuous as to think that the God who “brought again our Lord Jesus from the dead” (Heb. 13:20) will also, quite naturally, be pleased to bring me from the dead, too. I don’t understand all that. ...All that I can do is to *stand under it*.³

Here we see the expression of Christian hope. It is not mere optimism; it does not grow out of Hall's sense of intrinsic goodness or worth. Indeed, he is fully aware of his own aging and his eventual "non-being." It does not try to coerce or even to predict the future. Hall is "agnostic" about the future, humbly admitting he doesn't know what shape the gospel promises will take. His is a mature hope, pressing beyond conventional notions of "self-esteem," willing to put aside all anxiety about the future, even the anxiety of personal survival, in favor of a joyful, peace-giving conviction that God will be there. He doesn't understand the gospel; he stands under it.

There are many lessons to be drawn from this description of hope, but perhaps two are most significant. First is the truth that Christian hope is the one virtue that prepares us for failure. Lasch, again, states,

If we distinguish hopefulness from the more conventional attitude today known as optimism...we can see why it serves us better in steering troubled waters ahead than a belief in progress. Not that it prevents us from expecting the worst. The worst is always what the hopeful are prepared for. Their trust in life would not be worth much had it not survived disappointments in the past, while the knowledge that the future holds further disappointments demonstrates the continuing need for hope.⁴

Several years ago, while on sabbatical in South Africa, I had the occasion to meet a young Johannesburg physician whose specialty was the AIDS virus. He labored in a dingy inner city hospital where the beds of the sufferers spilled out of the wards and lay scattered through the narrow corridors like toppled bowling pins. Taking a few minutes' break from his weary and hurried rounds, he sat behind his desk, massaging his temples. "The numbers are growing at a fearful rate," he said. "In some areas, over half the population is infected, and we do not have enough to help them. We don't have the medicine, the beds, the staff, the knowledge."

"What keeps you going?" I asked.

He spoke quietly, hesitantly. "My faith." He looked out the window. The African sky was steel gray. "I am holding on," he said, "to the possibility of hope."

The "possibility of hope." This young physician said it just right, I think. There was no bravado, no chipper, smiley-faced Christian optimism, no blind faith, no naive "I believe for every drop of rain that falls, a flower grows." To have assumed such a posture would have amounted to a callous, even blasphemous, disregard of the real, unyielding human pain all around him. He was clinging to hope, and hope alone; there was nothing in his circumstances to justify any positivism or optimism. The facts had to be faced: the virus was sure to spread, his patients would continue to die despite his best efforts, the red surge of suffering would flow beyond all human power to contain it. What kept this young man at work in the wretched wards of pain was the faith — the absurd faith, some would say — that the full truth about his circumstances was *not* self-contained. What allowed him to face the facts and to keep going nonetheless was the hope that God would act from the future toward the present to create a redemption not already there in the present tense. In other words, his eyes told him that the suffering and death all round him were a terrible word, a word that must be heard and heeded, but his hopeful faith reassured him that they were not the final word. That Word would be spoken from the future by the One who has promised to speak it, and it would judge

the present, destroy all that damages life, and transfigure all creation, setting forth what Moltmann has called “the universal Easter laughter.”⁵

The ability of Christian hope to sustain itself in the face of failure, loss, and death is much of the reason that the eschatological and apocalyptic symbols of that hope — images such as the roaring of the sea, calamities in the heavens, and distress upon the earth — are so severe. They point to a hope that endures when the earth and the heavens are shaken. As Morse puts it,

The early apostolic mission to every nation under heaven apparently trusted that there was a promised future which makes human beings response-able, able to respond in an ethic of hopeful perseverance working through love, before all the terrors overclouding the earth. ...What faith professes to hear in the gospel testimonies [of the future] is not a prediction of the inevitability of destruction, but a promise, as only God can keep, that even when the worst things come upon us that can possibly happen, they will not be able to prevent Christ’s coming to us in redemption, an ultimate reclaiming from all harm.⁶

The second lesson to be drawn from the contrast of hope to its pretenders, positivism, optimism, and blind faith, is that preachers need to help hearers make the distinctions in their own experience.

Late one evening years ago, on a long flight to somewhere, after the dinner trays had been cleared away, the man in the seat next to me began talking about his boyhood. He had been raised, he told me, in a devout Christian family living in cabin in a clearing deep in the woods, far from electricity, plumbing, paved roads and the other niceties of town. His family was, he said, quite poor by most standards, but he spoke warmly of what his parents had given to him: their love, their strength, their seasoned faith.

One day, he recounted, when he and his parents were out in the fields away from the cabin, a stray spark leapt from the fireplace and landed in a pile of kindling. They returned to find nothing left of their home but a curl of smoke and a mound of hissing ashes. The family had nowhere else to stay. So, while his mother rummaged through the ruins searching for anything of value, he and his father headed down the long road into town to pick up some food, blankets, tools, and a cut of canvas to rig a makeshift tent that would serve as lodging while they rebuilt the cabin. When he and his father returned, they saw in the yard the few things his mother had managed to salvage — several dishes, one or two books, the iron frame of a bed, a pair of blackened scissors. She had placed these lonely possessions, all they had left, in a circle, and in the middle was a rusted tin can in which she had arranged a sheaf of freshly picked wild flowers. “When we saw the flowers,” he said, “we knew we would be all right.”

I can imagine relating this story in a sermon. It is a warm story and a good sermon illustration, but what does it really mean? I would argue, based on the full context of my conversation with this man, that the wild flowers in the rusty can were a sign of Christian hope, an almost sacramental symbol of trusting in the continuing care of God even in the face of deep loss. But there are rival interpretations to be considered — indeed, every religious experience is subject to multiple explanations — and the task of the preacher today, in a time of theological uncertainty and confusion, is not only to give religious experience its proper name but also to rescue it from its hermeneutical

competitors. To be specific, I name the flowers in the can as “hope,” but one could argue that they were a sign of positivism or optimism, the never-say-die resilience of the human spirit, the sort of brave confidence one sees on CNN when people shovel the mud out of their flood-destroyed homes and declare, “I built this place before and I can build it again.” Or the flowers in the can could be evidence of blind faith, a sentimental and naive denial of the inescapable fact that we live in an uncaring and randomly cruel world where a stray spark can destroy a life of memories and meaning. Maybe the flowers were just another lottery ticket purchased by bankrupt losers who are blindly confident their number will come up next time.

Sometimes homileticsians advise us to respect stories, to let them stand on their own (I have, myself, given such advice). Good stories, the conventional homiletical wisdom goes, are spoiled if you have to explain them. I wish to argue somewhat to the contrary, namely that human experiences are inherently ambiguous and can move, in terms of meaning, in a variety of directions. Part of the task of preaching today is to help shape theological discernment by giving some content and fiber to theological concepts, like hope. I am not talking about overexplaining or belaboring the “point” of a narrative. I am, rather, holding out the desirability of taking moments of theologically rich human experience and helping hearers not only to name what they are but also to discern what they are not.

Sparks of Trust and Candles of Hope

Another task of the preacher of hope today is to help the church understand its own life as a sign of hope. This understanding of the church is over against the more simple and straightforward idea of the church as a community of good, high-minded people. As philosophical theologian John Milbank argues, in a brilliant and difficult essay, liberals (of the Protestant variety) have always sought to recover a more political, historically accessible Jesus from the mythological framework of the New Testament. By identifying a Jesus who does good, even radical, works like feeding the hungry, freeing prisoners, and loving enemies, and who calls us to imitate him in doing likewise, liberalism can “retrieve what may be a viable practice from under the dead hand of mythology.” Thus faith is collapsed into ethics.⁷

Over against the notion of the church as a community of people “more moral” than others, a view found not only among liberal mainliners but also in evangelical piety, is the picture of the church as “more hopeful” than others. The church is not a society founded by Jesus that people join in order to be good. The life of such a church would be generated from the present toward the future and thus marked by positivism and optimism rather than hope. The church is, instead, an expression of God’s future arrived prematurely in the historical present. It is a work of the Spirit. This does not mean that the church is perfect, of course; it simply means that it is a people who believes God’s promises and vibrates to them in the present.

As such, the church becomes, as Barth claimed, a beacon of light to the world, a “great effective and living hope,” not because church people are intrinsically more ethical than others, but because they live in a way that cannot be accounted for except as a response to promises of God for the future.

On a beautiful weekend one fall, I was at a conference center in the mountains of North Carolina leading a retreat for a congregation. On Saturday afternoon we had “free time,” and one of the options was a bus trip along a portion of the Blue Ridge

Parkway. The fall foliage was in full glory, so I signed up for the ride.

As I boarded the bus, I found a vacant seat next to a man who was alone, a man I had noticed in the group but had not met. We had barely pulled out of the parking lot before he turned to me and announced in conspiratorial tones, "I used to be an evangelist, you know."

My idea of a pleasant afternoon among the leaves did not include theological conversation with former evangelists, and I began to rue my choice of seats. But I was trapped, and he went on. "Yes, I preached all through these hills — little towns, small churches, tent meetings. I preached hundreds of messages. But then, one day, I realized I had been preaching the wrong thing."

Now I was intrigued. "Preaching the wrong thing?"

"Yeah, the wrong thing. I thought that the gospel was a list of things people have to believe. You know, 'Folks, you have to believe this and you have to believe that or God's gonna send you to hell.' That sort of thing. But one day I was reading the Bible, trying to get up a sermon, and it hit me like a thunderstorm, that's not the gospel! The gospel doesn't say, 'You gotta believe this and that.' The gospel says, 'Friends, I have some good news. Hey, we don't have to live this way any more!'"

Barth would agree. The life of the church is the life of those who hear and trust God's promises of liberation and who respond to those promises. Their life becomes a dance of freedom, a sign to the world, "Hey, we don't have to live this way any more. Things can be different."

[The church] can and must be to the human world around her a reminder of the justice of the kingdom of God already established on earth in Jesus Christ and a promise of its future manifestation. ...To those outside, she can and should not only say, but also demonstrate by deed...that *things can be different*, not merely in heaven but on earth, not just someday but even now....⁸

Or, in the words of Jurgen Moltmann,

[T]he life we live here and now is already transfigured and becomes a *festive* life, life in celebration. The joy brings music and imagination into this life, so that it is not just lived but is also shaped and given expression. Then life does not just go forth, it is *set* forth and molded by God and human beings. Lived life itself becomes a song of praise. Even in pain and fear, community with the crucified Christ brings into life sparks of trust and candles of hope.⁹

Not long ago, I saw some of what Moltmann calls "sparks of trust and candles of hope" in a little country church located in the middle of corn fields and pine thickets near the Chesapeake Bay. The church, just down a farm road from a little vacation place my wife and I own, is part of a three-point Methodist charge.

I went down to the church for worship one Sunday morning and found the congregation of thirty or so gathered, but no minister. This was nothing unusual, since the minister leads worship at all three of the charges each Sunday, driving like a dervish from church to church, and often arrives sometime in the middle of the service. So, the congregation was engaging in their weekly moment of high liturgy known as "killing

time waiting on the preacher.” A lay leader, a local farmer, was in charge, shifting back and forth uncomfortably in the pulpit, looking a tad out of place, taking hymn requests, thanking by name those who had worked on the Peach Festival, inquiring about those absent and sick and infirm.

At one point, after a few numbers from the hymnal had been sung, the lay leader announced that we would have prayer and asked if there were “prayer requests.” Someone said his wife was having surgery, another named a cousin in a distant place who was “having a hard time,” still another mentioned a child who had been hurt in a car accident. The leader down wrote each concern on a pad, the better to remember them when it came time to pray. Then a woman in the back suddenly stood up and blurted out that it was only right that we pray this morning for the people of Iraq. The lay leader’s pencil paused in mid stroke, and he glanced out at the woman, his brow knitted in puzzlement. You could almost read his mind: “When I say ‘prayer requests,’ I mean the sick and the shut-ins. Why is Irene Hinkley bringing people from Iraq into this? Saddam Hussein is stirring up trouble again, and now Irene wants us to pray for him.” He fumbled for words, finally saying, “I hope we have some strong leadership, but I doubt it.”

“We *should* pray for our leaders,” someone called out. This time it was a man in the second pew.

“And for the leaders of Iraq, too.” This from another man.

“Yes, that’s right,” chimed in a woman near the organ. “Jesus wants us to pray even for our enemies.”

“Not just pray for them, but love them, too,” said the woman who had made the prayer request in the first place.

There was no rancor, no anger, no bitterness from anyone who spoke. The church was simply trying to figure out how to pray rightly and, in the process, rediscovering the gospel. They were not merely responding to their own ethical sensibilities, they were hearing a voice from outside themselves. Calling to them from the kingdom was the voice of their Jesus, the Jesus who promises to love them to the end of time, summoning them to love, even their enemies. Perhaps, like many other Americans, the members of this little church harbor a secret wish that the CIA will snuff out Saddam Hussein, but, on this Sunday morning, they prayed for him and for his people. They were a beacon of hope as they embodied the truth that, because of Jesus Christ, “*things can be different*,” as Barth phrased it, “not merely in heaven but on earth, not just someday but even now.”

Songs in the Night

The protagonist of John L’Heureux’ troubling story, “The Expert on God,”¹⁰ is a doubt-ridden Jesuit priest. Since age ten, he has been plagued by doubts — doubts about the Trinity, doubts about Christ’s presence in the eucharist, doubts about the virginity of Mary, doubts about the divinity of Christ, even doubts about the humanity of Christ. “At one time or another,” the narrator tells us, “he doubted every article of belief, but only for a while, and only one at a time.”

Finally, however, he develops a doubt that will not pass: he begins to doubt the love of God. In the face of his doubt, he prays for faith, but none comes. So, he prays for hope, but when that is not given either, he simply goes on with his duties — teaching, preaching, saying Mass.

Then, one bright, clear day, after saying Mass at Our Lady of Victories, he is driving home to the Jesuit house, marveling in his ironic and doubtful way over the absence of God in the world, when he comes across a terrible automobile accident. A young man lies dying, trapped in an overturned car. The priest is able to force open the crumpled car door and manages to cradle the nearly dying man in his arms. Taking a vial of holy oil from his pocket, the priest anoints the dying man, pronouncing, "I absolve you from all your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

But, then, nothing happens. There is no shift in the world, no change in the dire situation, no word from heaven, not even any human rescuers. Only the silent world and the dying "boy's harsh, half-choked breathing." The priest begins to pray — recited prayers, rote prayers, prayers about Mary, prayers to the Father in heaven. He feels foolish, but what else can he do, what else can he say? Then come the final lines of the story, as the priest wonders,

What would God do at such a moment, if there were a God? "Well, do it," he said aloud, and heard the fury in his voice. "Say something." But there was silence from heaven.

...What could anyone say to this crushed, dying thing, he wondered. What would God say if he cared as much as I? ...The priest could see death beginning across the boy's face. And still he could say nothing.

The boy turned — some dying reflex — and his head tilted in the priest's arms, trusting, like a lover. And at once the priest, faithless, unrepentant, gave up his prayers and bent to him and whispered, fierce and burning, "I love you," and continued until there was no breath, "I love you, I love you, I love you."¹¹

L'Heureux' character of the priest can be understood in two ways. Either he is finally the secular man, who at last rids himself of the burden of his failed mythology and acts lovingly on his own, or — and this is my own wager — he is a converted man, a man who moves from a childish faith to a mature and hopeful one. In this latter view, the priest gives up his immature idea of a God who comes when we whistle to make everything all right in favor of a God who summons the faithful from the future, calling them to be in the present what all humanity shall be in the end. Thus the priest, by his loving action toward the dying man, "clings to the possibility of hope" in a world of suffering.

And what is the sound of this divine voice that summons from the future? In a striking passage in *The Coming of God*, Moltmann avoids talking of God's future in concrete terms, saying instead that the transfigured creation "is like a great song or a splendid poem or a wonderful dance...." What is finally at the end? Song, dance....and laughter. "The laughter of the universe," states Moltmann, "is God's delight."¹²

While we await the fulness of this laughter, we can already begin to hear some of the notes of the great song, and, like a country church choir, we begin to sing, haltingly, our little, cracked voices straining in hope toward those notes we cannot yet quite reach.

On a cold Saturday morning not too many years ago, I paid a visit to an old friend. It was the weekend before Christmas, and his neighborhood was gaudy with the

trappings of a holiday cut loose from its moorings: an electric Frosty the Snowman winked from a doorway, a mélange of jolly Santas cavorted across front lawns, a string of reindeer grazed under pine trees.

My friend lay in an upstairs bedroom, cared for by friends and tender folks from the hospice, who ushered me in and, then, discreetly left us alone. There was not much to say. This would be his last Christmas, and we both knew it. He could not move from his bed without help; as his prospects dimmed, the stream of cheerful cards and flowers had slowed, and his coming death, only a few weeks in the future, was already an intruder in the room. Despite the numbing effect of the medicines, he was in constant pain now, his skin an oily gray, his face so taut that he seemed always near some expression between a scream and a smile, and his eyes constantly wide, doll-like, the liquid, unfocused eyes of a dying man who sees nothing and yet sees everything. We sat mostly silent, a word passing between us only now and then, not an awkward silence, but more the stillness of old friends content to sit and to say farewell with quietness.

Suddenly there was movement downstairs, the sounds of muffled voices, the shuffle of feet. It was a choir from the church come to do caroling, come to sing songs of the hope and comfort of the Christ child. We heard them whispering, trying to decide what to sing. Indeed, what do you sing to a dying man? Then their voices started, sweet and pure, “Lo how a rose e’er blooming....” My friend and I looked at each other and waited as the choir slowly climbed the stairs to the sick room, their voices growing nearer and stronger. “...to show God’s love aright....” The choir was now standing in the doorway. My friend, deep into the darkness of dying and agonizing hours away from the dawn, turned away so they would not see his tears as they sang, “She bore for us a savior, when half spent was the night.”

It was the sound of God’s song and joyful divine laughter, a song not springing up from the present but coming to us from the promised future of God, a future when suffering and death will be no more. It was a song preached from the future into the present, preached by a little choir trudging up the stairs in the bleak midwinter. And because of this song all of us, dying as we are, can cling to the possibility of hope.

Notes

¹ Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 81.

² Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994), 334 (emphasis in the original).

³ Douglas John Hall, *Why Christian? For Those on the Edge of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 174.

⁴ Lasch, 81.

⁵ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Coming God: Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 339.

⁶ Morse, 334.

⁷ John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 147.

⁸ Karl Barth CD IV/2/721 as quoted in Clifford Green, *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom* (London: Collins, 1989), 38.

⁹ Moltmann, 338.

¹⁰ John L’Heureux, “The Expert on God” in *Comedians* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990).

¹¹ L’Heureux, 34-35.

¹² Moltmann, 338-339.