

# The Tender Mercy of our God

Luke 1:57-80

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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On the fourth and final Sunday of Advent, our theme is love. Throughout this season, we have been making our way through the first chapter of Luke's gospel.

Like last week, our text is a song, this time by Zechariah.

Mary's song has come to be known as the Magnificat. Zechariah's is called the Benedictus.

This, too, is a song that has resounded through the ages and is sung and prayed by Christians around the world throughout the year.

A quick refresher: Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were advanced in years when they got a surprise angelic visit with news that they would have a son.

Zechariah was understandably incredulous and responded, "How can I be sure this will happen?" For his failure to trust in the promise of God, he was struck mute for 9 months—for the entire period of Elizabeth's pregnancy.

His tongue is loosed when the baby is born, and they give him the name John. And the next thing out of Zechariah's mouth is the song that was just read.

Mary's song is about the great reversal that her son would bring about, about the lowly being lifted, the proud being brought down, the hungry being filled with good things while the rich are sent away empty.

Zechariah's song has a few different themes. He sings of redemption, of salvation from Israel's enemies, from "all who hate us." He sings of how his son John will prepare the way for the Messiah, proclaiming the forgiveness of sins.

And his song ends with this beautiful image of the rising sun coming to shine on those living in the shadows of darkness and death, guiding our feet into the path of peace.

What is this light that shines?

Well, we know that the answer is of course Jesus and that this light probably has something to do with love (everything about Jesus seems to have *something* to do with love!).

But what can we say about Jesus and light and love that we haven't heard a thousand times at Christmas before?

Do these things still have the capacity to inspire and overwhelm and move us? Or are they, like so many other things this season, just kind of part of the Christmas furniture?

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On this last Sunday of Advent and second-last Sunday of 2024, I want to re-introduce you to someone that I first mentioned way back at the beginning of the year.

You may recall that in the absence of any faith questions for the sermon series, I did a three-part series called "Why Christianity?" that was oriented around the categories of "the good," "the true," and "the beautiful."

I argued that the Christian message corresponded to our longing in all three of these directions.

In the last of these sermons, I told a bit of the story of a woman named Ayaan Hirsi Ali.

Hirsi Ali is a refugee from Somalia who fled to Europe for a better future. Eventually, she became a prominent Dutch politician and intellectual and has now found her way to the USA. That is her geographic journey.

Her journey of faith is even more interesting. She went from being a one-time adherent of the severe and uncompromising version of Islam preached by the Muslim Brotherhood to becoming an equally uncompromising atheist after 9/11.

She was (and is) a tenacious intellectual who is not afraid to step into the fray of politics and religion.

She's also a recent convert to Christianity. Which is surprising. I remember reading her back in the early 2000's while I was writing about the new Atheism for my master's thesis, and she was a quite strident critic of religious belief.

Her conversion narrative is a fascinating one. On one level, it seems to be a conversion to a cultural argument.

She sees how Christianity has been responsible for creating so much of the world she loves and doesn't want to lose, a world of human rights, and tolerance, and compassion, and freedom of conscience and expression, and democracy, and many other things besides.

Many have accused her of "converting" simply as a reaction to her fears about some of the excesses she dislikes or is afraid of, whether the extreme form of Islam she was raised in or some of the intolerant strains of left-wing progressivism that have dominated the last decade or so in the West.

But she has been adamant that her conversion was and is deeply personal.

On Monday morning a friend sent me an interview with Hirsi Ali by a well-known atheist named Alex O'Connor who has a podcast called Within Reason. I watched it while riding my exercise bike.

The whole interview was interesting, but I was particularly drawn to the part where the interviewer repeated the question of whether her conversion was cultural or personal.

Here's what she said:

It's personal, completely personal. I was in a place of complete darkness in crisis. I was terrified. I was confused. I was in this depression. It just felt this emptiness and darkness.

*[T]he rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness...*

She went on.

In the years that I was in therapy, I would see, you know, there was all of these rational conclusions [about] how you respond to a certain situation.

I was diagnosed with PTSD, part of it was because... of a lot of what went on in my childhood and trying to shut that off. And the advice you get through the books and the study based on studies of the human condition and the conclusions they reach and the advice they give now is plainly in the Bible and it's for free. And so there's a great deal of wow.

O'Connor interrupted at this point.

What is it that you've find in the Bible that, that you would also find as, as a result of therapy?

Hirsi Ali:

One thing that therapists insist on when you come from a very damaged background and childhood like I did, **is this lack of being loved and the fear of abandonment and rejection and now reading the message of Jesus, it's this abundant love. God gave you a life and he loves you, and his love is unconditional.** It's infinite I think... And when I read that now part of me thinks again, processing this with a number of other patients or a number of other broken people, I think you guys, you've got this for free.

I mean, it's like, it's in your culture. You could have just gone to church.<sup>1</sup>

I sat there huffing and puffing on my exercise bike thinking about this story of a tenacious intellectual, a politician, a former Muslim, former atheist, but also a deeply wounded child agonizing in a therapist's chair about not feeling loved, feeling abandoned and rejected...

And coming across Jesus for the first time. And encountering unconditional love. Mercy. Acceptance. Forgiveness.

I thought of Zechariah's song:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/88-ayaan-hirsi-ali-why-i-converted-to-christianity/id1458675168?i=1000677931838>

to give his people the knowledge of salvation  
through the forgiveness of their sins,  
<sup>78</sup> because of the tender mercy of our God...

I wondered, do we forget how utterly remarkable it is that God is tender? That God is merciful? That God forgives?

Particularly for those of us who have been Christians for a long time, have we lost the capacity to be astonished at how staggering it is that God should be so inclined toward us?

Sometimes those who encounter these things for the first time can reawaken our wonder at the most basic truth of the Christian message.

God. Is. Love.

I was very grateful that Ayaan Hirsi Ali took me to church Monday morning on my exercise bike.

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This week I also came across a marvelous passage from a collection of Advent writings by the great German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer who said that every human life:

has its time and its hour of God, and... that under our paths are the deepest shafts of eternity.<sup>2</sup>

Zechariah's song is like a shaft of eternity suddenly breaking the surface appearing to light up our darkness.

Like Mary, Zechariah gets his tenses all wrong. He speaks in the present tense when he says that God has:

- *looked* favourably
- *redeemed*
- *raised up* a mighty Saviour
- *spoke*

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<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *God is in the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 14.

- *shown mercy*
- *remembered* his covenant

Zechariah sings of these words in the present tense, even though Jesus has not yet arrived. God *has done* these things.

He also sings about what God *will do*.

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.

How Zechariah's people needed this news, this shaft of eternity breaking up out of the ground!

How we need this news, two thousand odd years later. How we need light for our darkness. How we need to be guided into the way of peace.

How we need this Saviour. How we need this love.

**The story of the world is a story of the tender mercy of our God, who remembers his people and who offers salvation.**

This is what Christians have always been in the business of proclaiming.

It is a long story, true. And sometimes it doesn't feel like it's ever going to arrive at its destination.

Sometimes it feels like there is too much ordinariness, too much violence and confusion, too much sin and sickness, for this story to have anything like a God of mercy behind and beneath, around and within it.

But these shafts of eternity Bonhoeffer speaks about... They resonate so deeply with the things that we long for.

They give expression to our unspoken hopes and fears.

Hopes that we are not forgotten, that we are not alone, that God has not left us to our violence and our sin, that we can be forgiven.

The story of the world is a story about the tender mercy of our God. It is a story about the most determined love the world has ever known, a love that invites us in, from darkness to light, guiding our feet on the path of peace.

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On Wednesday, I preached the Christmas sermon for five services at the jail. I reflected on some of what I preached on last Sunday here. About Mary's promise that her boy would "fill the hungry with good things."

What good things are we hungry for, I asked the inmates?

I started to itemize a list.

- Connection
- Belonging

I noticed a young woman off to the side begin to lean forward.

- Purpose and meaning in our lives

She was nodding enthusiastically now. And she was looking at me with an attention and an intensity that... well, let's just say that I'm not used to in most of my sermons. 😊 All around her women were displaying varying degrees of attention or interest, but she was all in.

I went on.

- Forgiveness
- Hope

Her nodding was even more pronounced now. Her eyes glistened.

I said that I thought every human being has a deep hunger to know that our lives are part of some larger story that means something—a story that is going somewhere, a story that is being guided by a force that is bigger and stronger than we are.

We have a hunger to know that we *matter*. That we are known and loved as we are.

She smiled widely. I thought she was going to nod her head right off her neck.

I thought about Monday on my exercise bike, about this prominent Dutch intellectual coming to the shocking realization that what she paid therapists to tell her was available for free in the Bible.

About how she was in this dark place and how desperately she needed to know that she wasn't abandoned or rejected, that she was loved and forgiven.

And I looked at this woman on the bleachers in a prison gymnasium seemingly encountering or being reminded of these same things.

I thought of Bonhoeffer's words: Every human life has its time and its hour of God.

I thought about how we *all* need to hear these things at Christmas time.

We don't know how or where or when, but I believe that these deep shafts of eternity that Bonhoeffer speaks of pierce through the armour of our skeptical and cynical times, they illuminate whatever darkness we might find ourselves in, and they speak the truth of all truths.

That God became one of us, to love us into salvation.

because of the tender mercy of our God,  
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven  
<sup>79</sup>to shine on those living in darkness  
and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the path of peace."

What kind of light explodes the darkness? The love of God.

In many ways, love is the source of the other three advent themes.

Hope, peace, and joy are expressions of, results of, implications of the staggering truth that God loves the world.

That God loves us.



Christmas is nearly upon us. I don't know how you might need to encounter the love of God in the Christ child this season.

I don't know what God might be speaking to you today, what he might be inviting you to accept or let go of or encounter anew or believe for the first time.

I do believe that every human life has its time and its hour of God. I do believe that there are deep shafts of eternity underneath all of our paths.

Christmas is when God reaches down into the human condition and says, "I am with you. I am for you. I am what love looks like."

May we accept this gift. And may we live this love.

Amen.

