

Nothing Routine

(About the Solace of Advent's Consolation)

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

(Isaiah 40:1)

*And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon,
and this man was just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel.*

(Luke 2:25)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the Third Sunday of Advent, December 17, 2017
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We came THAT close! But on that day – December 6, 1969 -- our entire state was in need of consolation. Since this sermon series opened with moon ADVENT-ures, let me mention that it had been the summer of that same year of 1969 that Neil Armstrong, Commander of Apollo 11, had made “*one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind.*” Only two weeks earlier, on November 24, Apollo 12 under the Mission Command of Astronaut Pete Conrad splashed down safely after yet another successful Apollo moon mission. It would be only four months later, April 11, 1970 that Apollo 13 would launch, the image I used to launch this series. It was in Apollo 13’s pre-launch news conference that a reporter asked if journeys to the moon had become *Routine*. Commander Jim Lovell leaned into the microphone to say, “*I assure you, there’s Nothing Routine about a trip to the moon.*” I’ve anchored this series on Commander Lovell’s “*Nothing Routine.*”

There was *Nothing Routine* about the redemptive mission upon which God embarked. Even for God, it was no small step, but a giant leap to empty himself and be born a baby in Bethlehem’s manger. The Book of Hebrews calls Jesus the *Commander of our Salvation* and he, as *Mission Commander*, is described in Chapter 10 in what I’ve called the pre-launch moment. “*When Christ came into the world he said, sacrifices and offerings you did not desire, but a body you have prepared for me.*” While temple sacrifices had become *Routine*, there was *Nothing Routine* about Jesus’ mission to accomplish a once-for-all atoning sacrifice.

Thus far our series has taken us heavenward – to the moon first and then, last week for Advent 2, to follow Psalm 8 beyond the moon to the stars. Today we return to earth, where much was happening in 1969 that was *Nothing Routine*. With that, I bring you back full circle to my first sentence. Let me tell you the story about a day – December 6, 1969 -- that was *Nothing Routine*, the day we came THAT close.

I awoke that morning, a 15 year old Arkansas Razorback fan, as did all of Arkansas, aglow with excitement. We were anxiously awaiting a game that afternoon which Texas Coach Darrell Royal dubbed, “*The Big Shootout.*” 1969 closed out a full century of college football, and to mark football’s first century, ABC Sports Executive Roone Arledge had an idea. Before the

season began he went to Beano Cook and said, "It's the 100th year of college football. Let's do something special. Why don't you look over all the schedules and predict what game we can pluck out of the middle of the year and place it as the final game of the season. If you pick No. 1 and No. 2 I think we can get President Nixon to come and crown the national champion." Nixon was the new president, having been inaugurated earlier that year, in January of 1969.

Yes, but c'mon, what were the chances to guess correctly? Ohio State was the defending national champion with most of their starters back. Beano, though, thought they'd lose to somebody, predicting that Texas and Arkansas have the best chance to be undefeated. There was *Nothing Routine* about that prediction! It's exactly what happened. Ohio State did lose, and Texas and Arkansas were ranked 1 and 2. Moving the game from their regular October spot to December, the last game of the football century, proved to be a stroke of sports genius.

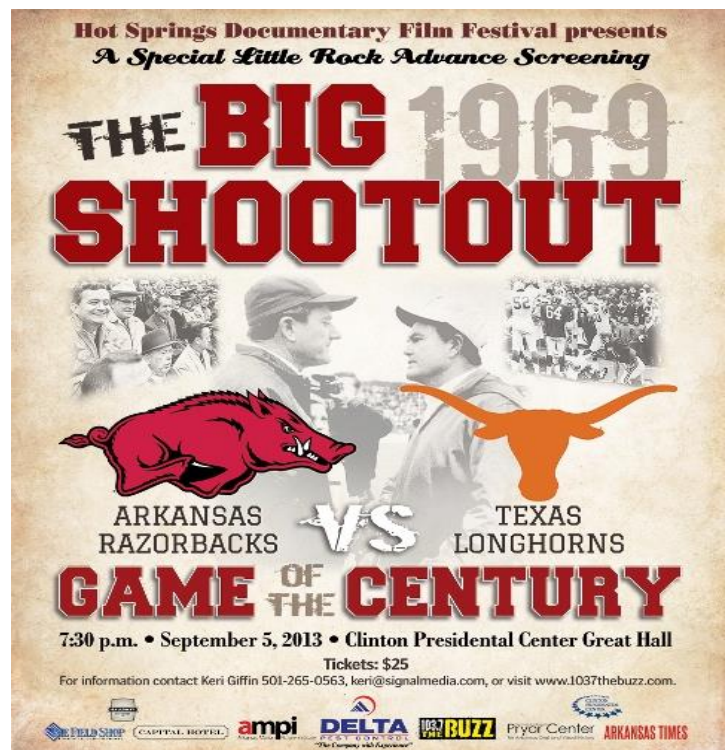
It would be, to use the title of Terry Frei's book about the game, *Horns, Hogs, and Nixon Coming -- Texas vs. Arkansas in Dixie's Last Stand*.

Nixon did come. A huge fan of the game, he said it wasn't about politics. He hadn't won either state in the 1968 election. Nixon's coming did impact the game outside the stadium in Fayetteville, bringing leaders in the anti-Vietnam War movement to organize demonstrations. ABC decided not to show the protests aimed at the President, but it was there. It was peaceful, despite the fact that only five days earlier, on December 1, the

Selective Service held a lottery for the draft, drawing birthdates out of a glass jar. This was the first draft lottery in 27 years, since 1942 after Pearl Harbor. The lottery was for those born between 1944 and 1950 and the first drawn, Number 1 in the draft, was September 14. I was born four years outside those parameters, in 1954, but my birthday's number was 140.

An urban legend grew out the game, that the ABC cameras showed one of many anti-Vietnam protestors holding a sign in a tree outside the stadium. The legend identified the student as Arkansas native and future president Bill Clinton. While Clinton was opposed to the war, in fact he was a Rhodes Scholar in England studying at Oxford and listening to the game on short-wave radio. However, it is true that it had been only 3 days earlier, on December 3, that the then 23 year old student, two days after the lottery, wrote a letter to an ROTC recruiter at the U of A thanking him for his help. The letter became famous during the 1992 presidential campaign.

What was more unpredictable than the anti-war protests was the racial unrest. The university's administration had been warned that black students were going to use the national spotlight to



protest the band playing *Dixie* after every score, promising to rush the field if *Dixie* was played. The band decided they would not play it, not even at the pep rally the night before at the Greek Theater. Anger surged and a black student was shot with a pellet gun after the pep rally, fortunately not seriously injured. (More on him in a moment.)

Both Texas and Arkansas had, that year, black scholarship players on their freshman team. The world, thankfully, was changing. This game would be the last major collegiate contest featuring all-white teams, Texas becoming the last all-white squad to win the national championship.

Now, as a 15 year old boy, I don't recall any of that, because I didn't know any of that. Awakening on December 6, it was all about the game. We Arkansans were proud, expectant, and confident, knowing there was *Nothing Routine* about this game. The eyes of the country were fixed on Fayetteville as not only Nixon, but Billy Graham came to offer the pre-game prayer. Perhaps some of you were there, and over half of the television sets in America were tuned in on that day.

Ah, the aroma of pigskin invincibility was thick in the air! We sensed that at long last our time had come for an undivided national title, unlike that split decision of pollsters in '64 (to this day both Arkansas and Alabama lay claim to the title through different polls). "*The fulness of time had come,*" to take the Apostle Paul a bit out of context. Everything was in place. We were sure of it. "*Come thou long-expected national title!*"

For a while, it looked as if our long wait was over. The Hogs under Coach Frank Broyles took control of the game and for three quarters euphoria was felt throughout the land. When the buzzer sounded to end the third quarter the Razorbacks led 14 - 0. The fourth quarter was all that stood between Arkansas and an opportunity to play in the Cotton Bowl for a National Championship. There was rapture, ecstasy, elation as the fourth quarter began. Would our wait, at long last, be over?

That's the day I learned, hard, the truth of Proverbs 13:12. In King James language, "*Hope deferred maketh the heart sick!*" We Arkansans, in the next fifteen minutes of football, became intimately familiar with that passage. Hope faded into heart sickness that day.

Texas' 4th Quarter comeback is forever etched into my memory. I'd be hard pressed to name any quarterback Texas has ever lined up behind center to take a snap, before 1969 or since, but the name of THAT quarterback, James Street, was forever made a part of my sports vocabulary, Longhorn-branded on my psyche, my Nebuchadnezzar, a name synonymous with defeat. Mr. Street scrambled 42 yards for a touchdown on the first play of the 4th Quarter, then orchestrated a comeback to win 15-14.

I know. Football's just a game. True, but I love what Dr. Andrew Hall, pastor of Fayetteville's First Baptist Church put on the church marquee that week at the corner of Dickson and College. "*Football is only a game. Eternal Things are Spiritual. NEVERTHELESS, BEAT TEXAS!*"

Alas, it was not to be. When the dust from "*The Big Shootout*" settled, there was Texas with all the prizes -- Southwest Conference champs, a trip to the Cotton Bowl, #1 ranking nationally. And the Razorbacks? What did Arkansas receive? We got what may be called, "*The*

Consolation Prize.” Now, let’s be honest. No one sets out to win the *Consolation Prize*. Consolation isn’t for the victors. No one stays awake at night before a big contest and dreams of being awarded the Consolation Prize. “*Consolation*” presumes defeat.

My title points out that there is *Nothing Routine about the Solace of Advent’s Consolation*. As we have read from Luke, when Simeon rejoiced at the coming of Jesus, he cast the miracle in the language of Jesus being the *Consolation of Israel*.

Great Consolation presumes Great Defeat, the dashing of earlier hopes. Another word for *Consolation* is *Comfort*, which is why I chose Isaiah 40, one of our wonderful Christmas passages. “*Comfort ye, O comfort ye my people, says the Lord.*” If you love Handel’s *Messiah* as do I, you know the power of this opening piece, “*Comfort ye, my people.*” Click on the link below to hear it performed by the London Philharmonic Orchestra and Chorus.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RmknWYFr6Xk>

Israel was a people, a nation, in need of *Comfort*. Isaiah had described Israel as “*full of sorrows and acquainted with grief.*” The infant nation had barely begun before they migrate to Egypt where a Pharaoh arises who knows not Joseph, and they suffer 400 years of bondage. Many times the Hebrews imagined their long wait for Messiah was over. There was Moses, who delivered the Hebrews from Egypt. Victory for the Hebrews was often so thick in the air you could cut it. There seemed, though, always a devastating fourth quarter setback to rob them of their hopes, the ecstasy of Exodus followed by the bewilderment of the wilderness.

Nor would their tribulations end once they possessed the Land under Joshua, finding themselves on a piece of real estate that was the hub of a geographical wheel of powerful nations. The Land is positioned in the fragile buffer zone of three continents – Asia, Europe, and Africa. To the north was powerful Assyria, whose rampages crushed the northern kingdom of Israel in 721 B.C. To the south was Egypt, waxing and waning through the centuries, but always seeking to control that vital corridor of trade routes running along the Mediterranean on the Via Maris (the Way of the Sea). To the west, across the Mediterranean were the Greeks who, under Alexander the Great, gathered the world under its cultural umbrella around 300 B.C., followed by the powerful Romans. It was the Romans, of course, who occupied the Land when Jesus was born. “*In the days of Caesar Augustus there went out a decree that all the world should be taxed.*”

Throughout Hebrew history, with perhaps the brief exception of King David and King Solomon, the Israelites were marginalized politically and militarily. Prophets, though, led the nation to glory in its marginal status, to know that Yahweh had loved them, not because they were more numerous, more righteous, wiser, or more powerful than other nations, but rather because of the mystery of his divine will.

Psalms 137 expresses Israel’s need for Consolation, written in Babylon after Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed the temple and led the people captive. “*By the rivers of Babylon we sat down, yea we wept when we remembered Zion! We hung our harps upon the willows! They that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, sing us one of the songs of Zion! But how can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?*” One can imagine the victorious Babylonians taunting the conquered Hebrews, “*Sing us your silly victory songs now!*”

I recall similar taunting after *The Big Shootout*. Arkansas radio stations had shown their confidence before the game by playing a recording which changed the words of “*I’m a Long, Tall Texan*” to “*I’m a Short, Squashed Texan, I played the Razorbacks today!*” After the game one could just hear Texans boast, “*Why don’t you sing your silly song now?*”

No, there was *Nothing Routine* about this game. My dear friend and former parishioner Bruce James was a defensive end on that Razorback squad, and in the 1970 season won All-American honors at his position, his picture hanging proudly in Razorback stadium. I spoke to him this week, preparing the message, and he told me “*I learned more about life from that game than any game we won.*” He and James Street, enemies on the field that day, would become wonderful friends. And, remember the African American man shot at the pep rally? I asked Bruce about him and he texted, “*His name was Darrel Brown, a nice guy who became a lawyer. He died a few years ago of cancer.*”

Dixie’s Last Stand, was not just a song that the band no longer played, but a symbol of an era passing as the turbulent 60s were put behind us. In so many ways *Consolation* was being sought by those long marginalized.



I closing, let’s look at this painting known as *Simeon’s Moment* by Ron DiCianni. Simeon’s face, I think, reveals the long-awaited release from anguish. As our series has brought us from the heavens to the earth, following the redemptive drama, so also this scene moves from the shining Star-like illumination over the child, to the brown map of the world making up the background.

I see in this image a full gathering of my first 3 messages:

Nothing Routine about the Scope of Advent’s Mission – the world.

Nothing Routine about the Wonder of Advent’s Love – the Christ-child.

Nothing Routine about the Solace of Advent’s Consolation – the face of Simeon.