

Nothing Routine (*The Moment when “All Is Promise”*)

While they were there, the time came . . .
(Luke 2:6a)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on Christmas Eve, **December 24, 2017**
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On this Holy Night when the season of Advent becomes that of Christmas, there is *Nothing Routine*. Our gathering tonight is different. Why is this night different than all other nights? My text draws your attention to a mere sliver of Luke’s narrative of the nativity, the beginning of verse 6, “*While they were there, the time came . . .*” I want you to hold those three words in your mind and heart -- “*The Time Came,*” because with those three words Luke draws us into the sacred moment we gather tonight to celebrate. “*The time came,*” Luke continues, “*for Mary to deliver her child, and she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.*”

Standing out in the memories of an expecting couple is the moment when “*the time came*” to head to the hospital, mom-to-be saying to dad-to-be, “*Honey, it’s time!*” I’m sure many parents here tonight hold such memories precious, the moment when the time came -- filled with excitement and joy, but also with anxiety and fear. Oh, and with comedy as the mix of emotions disrupts the routine, leaving dad fumbling for the keys, forgetting all rehearsed preparations in a *Nothing Routine* moment when *All Is Promise*.

Luke brings us to this Holy Night by way of a story that takes us from the political calculations of an emperor in Rome who, wishing to fine-tune his conducting of the empire, issues a decree intended to more efficiently organize the tax register. From Rome, Luke takes us all the way to a lodge keeper who is organizing nothing more than bedding arrangements for an inn in Bethlehem, a far-flung village on the outskirts of those Mediterranean territories then occupied by Rome. Luke gathers together these strands of the redemptive drama, gradually bringing our focus to those three words – *The Time Came*. Here was the moment when *All Is Promise*.

Two weeks ago as our sanctuary filled to capacity, swelling into chairs we were hurriedly setting up at the back, we listened to our Chancel Choir and Orchestra’s Cantata, *Let There Be Christmas*. I love to hear the tuning up of the orchestra before a concert. Several years ago Paul Greenberg, describing his experiences while attending a symphony, wrote words to which I can relate. “*My favorite part of any performance is the warm-up, just as the best part of any meal can be the appetizers. Slowly the crowd gathers . . . one by one, the members of the orchestra take their places on the stage and begin to tune their instruments, filling the great hall with free, discordant sounds not yet regimented into ordinary music. All is Promise.*”

Seems to me those three words, *All Is Promise*, are uniquely suited to describe that *Nothing Routine* moment when *The Time Came* for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem. The image of an

orchestra tuning their instruments seems an appropriate analogy for the gradually gathering intensity that is Advent, four weeks of increasing light until, at this moment, our liturgical rhythm leads us to light the Christ Candle.

You've heard an orchestra preparing for a performance. Were I to ask you to close your eyes, could you hear in your mind those discordant sounds of the many and various instruments? Let me help you imagine it as you click on the link below to hear the orchestra tuning their instruments:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfSH1ezvjM>

No matter whether you come for a cantata, for Bach or Mozart, or even at a local auditorium to hear a junior high school band, the warm-up is the same, an auditory tangle of competing sounds from instruments we all know will soon be working together in symphony. But not yet. For now, they exist only as a scattering of sound. Do you hear the tuning of the many and various instruments? Listen, and ride the ebb and flow of the tides of sound.

Then, when "*The Time Comes*," the conductor enters the hall. One by one the musicians heed the conductor's presence. Sound flees as silence emerges like a morning mist, not the absence of sound merely, but a Presence itself framing what is about to happen. Those gathered, sensing the nearness of its arrival, knows there is *Nothing Routine* in this Moment when *All Is Promise*.

The maestro gently raises his baton. With an almost imperceptible raising and dipping of the arms, the waves of sound begin to flow, the gradually intensifying anticipation of the many rehearsals now erupting into a symphony of sound. In the days and weeks leading up to the performance this moment was only imagined, a Promise yet-to-be-fulfilled. Now, when *The Time Came*, Promise gives way to Power, becoming reality. We drink it in with all our senses – seeing, hearing. It's as if we can touch the moment. This is no DVD, but live performance, a Beating Heart the distinction of this Moment, now flesh-and-blood.

So it was in Bethlehem, a Beating Heart Moment when the nation's centuries-long dream of a Messiah blossomed into the beauty of the Divine Redemptive Moment. It was the time for the fulfillment of the Promise proclaimed by Israel's patriarchs and prophets, priests and poets. In this *Nothing Routine* moment the tidiness of theology became a beating heart of flesh and blood lying in the rawness of a bed of hay midst the odor of a barnyard.

As we began this series in Hebrews, let me end it there. I love the opening words of Hebrews, the Maestro of the Divine Drama front and center. "*God, who in many and various ways (think of an orchestra and read: with many and various instruments) spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken unto us by his Son.*" In this moment, this Christmas Eve sliver of time before the child is born, silence frames the moment with a stillness more felt than observed. Now is *Nothing Routine* moment when *The Time Came . . .* and *All Is Promise*.

At whatever point in your life journey, I hope you will pause to frame the moment in silence, ready to move into the new year ahead knowing that, in Christ, *All Is Promise*.

Amen.