People, Look East

1033

Author Eleanor Farjeon

Composer Traditional French melody

Song of Solomon 2: 1-2

Luke 2: 1-20

Thoughts on the Text

Many congregations in the free-church tradition have yet to mine the riches of the Advent season. Advent leans the church toward both the first and second comings of Christ: Christmas and Christ's gathering of the Church. Leaning forward is the posture of hope. It is the posture of promise and testimony for the Church in this world.

East is the direction of dawning, of new days and new beginnings. This hymn speaks in beautiful poetry and imagery of love personified and making a difference in every aspect of human existence.

It is easy to despair in our day of hope and love ever returning to our society and culture, or even to the Church. Division has entrenched itself, digging its hole with the tools of fear and suspicion. Flourishing has given way to winning, which has given way to surviving. We are in desperate need of real hope and real love.

People, look east; Love, the Guest, the Rose, the Lord, is on the way. In fact he is the Way, the Truth and the Life. With Christ in our hearts and our minds, with Christ as our way of seeing things and processing what we hear, we can personify His love and make real the hope of the Gospel. Christ in us is how the church is to see itself…Christ courageously in us, not cowering behind us as we protect Him. Advent invigorates our hope and our love. It comes as a new dawn into a world where love and hope have found themselves, again, setting (drowning?) in the western sea.

This wonderful hymn paints the picture of Advent's love and hope as a seed planted in barren ground. That metaphor works too. We understand. We get the point and know its truth. Love and hope and hospitality have seemingly dried up and blown away, leaving our land barren. But seeds can be planted in the bare earth. The Gospel can green the earth. Jesus redeems all of creation. Love and hope can spout in us and through us; sprouting, a dawning from below, from within the barrenness.

A third metaphor blossoms in this great hymn: flowers. Flowers speak of hope whenever and wherever they appear. They speak of spring. They speak of gardens that don't have to produce food. They speak of beauty that will not be denied or ignored. And they smell good.

But this hymn is not describing a Disney cartoon. It is a call to work: "Give up your strength the seed to nourish." This hymn is a call to live the Gospel. It is a call to let Jesus work in and through us, even to the point of vulnerability and risk. Vulnerability and risk are seen as silly in an environment so given to protection and strength and control. But what we see rising in the Eastern dawn that comes with Jesus is a call to exactly that, living and being and thinking and seeing after the model and example of Jesus.

Run, Christians, run; not to your morality shelters, but into the messy chaos of life with truth and sacrifice and love and hope. As Jesus' sun rises lead the world out into the light and the warmth. Risk like a barefoot child in spring.

Terry W. York

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