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 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: Luke 2: 1-20
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“For Unto You”

Last week found us in a prison cell with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, where, in 1943, he wrote about the quiet Christmas he was preparing to celebrate that year. Bonhoeffer’s words suggested a Christmas outlook that I sensed might be helpful in our own predicament, as the pandemic forces upon us all a quiet Christmas we could scarcely have anticipated a year ago. In reflecting further on the ways the Christmas story speaks to our own situation, I found myself rereading yet another Christmas reflection, by yet another German theologian, speaking in yet another prison setting. This was a sermon from Karl Barth, offered some eleven years after Bonhoeffer’s prison letter, in 1954, collected in a slim little volume called *Deliverance to the Captives*. Barth regularly visited the prison in Basel, Switzerland, where he resided and taught following the war. Barth was much in demand as a speaker, and he was disinclined to accept many preaching invitations. Some people quipped that it was so difficult to hear Barth preach that you had to commit a crime in order to win such a hearing. On Christmas Day, in 1954, Barth entered the Basel prison, where he began his sermon with a prayer: “Grant today that many may break through the glitter and vanity of the holiday season and truly celebrate Christmas with us.”¹ And then he launched into a simple but moving meditation on the Christmas story found in Luke chapter 2. Barth was, in effect, offering those imprisoned in the Basel jail a gift, which was, first and foremost, a story, a text, spoken into their captivity.

You may have heard Barth’s name spoken from this or that pulpit over the years, but I’m guessing his story isn’t well known. And so I’ll share just a little about this remarkable man and the vast legacy that he left us. I should warn you, however, that there are ongoing debates – battles really – among theologians and pastors about how to position oneself in relation to Barth’s theology. Whole curriculums and theological orientations have been established upon receptivity, or lack of it, to Barth’s theology, which continue to reverberate today. The divinity schools at Yale and Duke, and the seminary at Princeton, continue to churn out students steeped in the theology of Karl Barth, even if at second or third hand. The divinity schools at Harvard and Chicago, by contrast, where Paul Tillich exerted an influence, never went in for it, preferring a theology more attuned to philosophical and cultural currents than the biblicism that Barth often espoused. I myself sit squarely on the latter side of that divide, though having spent more than a few years at Yale, I do retain a profound respect, awe even, for the legacy that Karl Barth has left us.

So who was he? Well, he was a fairly rotund and rather jolly looking professor of theology who lived through both the First and the Second World Wars. He wrote multiple volumes of something called the *Church Dogmatics*, which extend for more than 9000 pages. He was widely regarded as the most important Protestant theologian in the world at that point – even the Pope called him the most important theologian since Thomas Aquinas. He was devoted to the arts. Every morning, prior to writing, he would listen to Mozart as a means of priming his mind and his spirit. And he was also devoted to the theater. On a visit to the United States, one of the first things he did was to attend a performance not of Mozart, but of Chicago’s Second

¹ Barth, Karl, *Deliverance to the Captives* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), pg. 20.

City Comedy Revue, the forerunner of Saturday Night Live. For Barth, religion, liturgy, and church, existed as a kind of theater within the world. The world itself, Barth thought, was the theater in which the drama of human redemption was played out. For Barth, all the world was a stage.

Part of what makes him so compelling is his stance toward the political world he inhabited. In 1914, he was a young pastor in Safenwil, Switzerland, a remote mining town far from any cosmopolitan center – something like the coal mining region of West Virginia. He regularly visited with miners, and he became acquainted with their labor struggles, helping them to organize, to unionize, and to achieve a number of important reforms. His work earned him the nickname “the Red Pastor,” not only for his labor agitation, but because of his sympathies with socialism, a commitment he never, ever relinquished.

But something profound took place in 1914. A group of German intellectuals drafted a manifesto in support of Kaiser Wilhelm II’s war policy, effectively urging the German nation into the confrontation that would become World War I. Some of Barth’s theology teachers were among the signatories, and many churches rushed to embrace both the document and Germany’s larger place in the world, not unlike the way many American Christians, and not a few teachers of theology, reflexively supported the Iraq War after 9/11. It might also be akin to the way some churches and many Christians have lined up to support the antidemocratic sabotage being unleashed in our country now. It’s dispiriting, at least to me. For Barth in 1914, however, it was devastating. It sent him back to the Bible, and to the book of Romans especially. It sent him back to the theology of John Calvin, which, for Barth, seemed better equipped to stand up to the cultural chauvinism and national belligerence of Germany in that period. For four years, he labored to produce a response, which finally emerged in 1918, a book called *The Epistle to the Romans*. Ostensibly a commentary, it was in actuality a long treatise that attempted to grapple with the far-reaching significance of the years AD 1-30, in the life and ministry of Jesus. Barth called that event a crater or percussion point of history, one that we’re still contending with. It was, in essence, an attempt to come to terms with what the birth of Jesus meant, what Christmas means, for a world in which industrialization, technology, progress, and nationalism resulted in the horrors of trench warfare.

Here are a few of the things he said. Writing from a position in which he felt himself utterly trapped, and absolutely beholden to a situation as far reaching as it was inescapable, he wrote, “In this world, (people) find themselves to be imprisoned...their world is formless and tumultuous chaos, a chaos of the forces of nature and of the human soul.” But in the Gospel, in the appearance of Jesus Christ in the world in the form of a child, we are provided, Barth writes, with “a look-out, a door, a hope.” In that even, he says, “the prisoner becomes a watchman. Bound to his post as firmly as a prisoner in his cell, he watches for the dawning of the day.”² To be human, for Barth, is to be a prisoner of a sort, subject to events and circumstances that are beyond our control – political winds, the agitation of nations, and the outbreak of pestilence and plague, a metaphor Barth frequently deploys. To be human is to be subject to the whims of our bodies, which often don’t work the way we might wish, which sometimes compel us to do things we might know to be harmful. To be human is to be subject to desires that run counter to what we know to be prudent or wise. To be human is to be, at times, bound by feelings that, despite our best attempts at mastery, threaten to submerge us into the abyss.

In other words, Barth takes up Calvin’s old doctrine of predestination and overhauls it, so that it has to do not with a puppet master God writing the history of the world before it even

² Barth, Karl, *Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), pg. 38.

occurs, but as an existential predicament, in which we understand ourselves to be radically conditioned, buffeted on all sides by forces that shape and control us. It's not to say that we don't have choices. It's not to say that we can't respond decisively to particular events around us. Barth certainly did. It is to say that those events condition the choices that are available to us. It's also to say that our existence as creatures of time and space places profound limitations upon us, to the point that sometimes, as for Barth in 1914, we become as prisoners.

It's a condition that I suspect we all can relate to just now. There are all the obvious ways in which our movements and gatherings are constrained because of the pandemic just now. Christmas of 2020 has rendered all of us prisoners of a sort. But it's also true that our creaturely vulnerabilities have been newly exposed. We're tightly bound by the limitations of our immune systems, the limitations of our psychic defenses, and the limitations of our social systems. Little things can throw us, leaving us in a trough of despondence, even if by most external measures we have what we need – food and shelter and social support. But then too there are strange political currents moving among us just now, currents that course through the United States but also through many other places around the world, everywhere from Brazil to Israel, Haiti to Hungary, Poland to the Philippines. We respond to the news cycle, or I do at any rate, much like the narrator of Bob Dylan's *Ballad of a Thin Man*: "Something is happening here but you don't know what it is...do you, Mr. Jones?" Sometimes we do become as prisoners.

That's why those passages from the *Epistle to the Romans* feel so timeless, in a way. But it's also why Barth made a practice of preaching in prisons throughout his career. When he visited the United States in 1962, he made a point of visiting three prisons here – the Bridewell in Chicago, San Quentin in California, and Rikers Island in New York. He knew that the situation of prisoners is but an extreme instance of the human conditions that so often bedevil us all. But he also knew that was what made the Christmas story so very important. It was the moment that God entered the human scene, entered the very prison if you will, becoming subject to the same currents and conditions that bedevil us all. It was the moment that allows us all to become watchmen, confident of the coming dawn, confident that we have not been abandoned to the night.

When Barth preached at the Basel prison on Christmas Day in 1954, his message was remarkably simple. After a reading of Luke chapter 2, he focused in on one central verse in that story, a verse that he said contained the entire message of the New Testament: "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior..."³ And speaking to those prisoners, with whom he visited in their cells, with whom he smoked cigars, with whose condition he identified with so profoundly, Barth insisted that sentence wasn't merely delivered by an angel to shepherds abiding in a field. It was, he said, addressed personally to each of his listeners. "Unto you," is how the sentence begins, which means not only the shepherds, but each of those who are trapped, who are lost, who are bound, who are stuck, who are sad or lonely, disturbed or broken, mourning or ill. Unto you the word from the angel is spoken. Which is to say it's not a piece of information about the world, akin to something unfolding on the PBS *Newshour* or in the pages of the *Times*. It's spoken to you. And it's not an abstract statement, spoken in general. The angel does not say "To human beings is born this day..." It's spoken to you: you at home watching in your pajamas, you in your apprehension and fear this Christmas season, you in your ambition, your striving, you in the loss you negotiate, you in the schedule you do your best to maintain, you, down there where the spirit meets the bone, in the places where you are most deeply you. It is to you that God has come. It is for you that God has cast off eternity. It is to be

³ See "Unto You Is Born This Day a Savior," in *Deliverance to the Captives*, pgs. 20-27.

with you, in whatever lonely cell in which you dwell, that God has come. That's what Barth tells the prisoners in Basel, but it's also what I'm telling you: It is to you that the angel speaks his word.

But not only that. There is the further phrase "this day." "Unto you is born *this day*," the angel says. Barth underscores the present tense for his fellow prisoners. He notes that it doesn't have to do with a mythic past, with a moment from once upon a time. And he also observes that it's not about the future, about what may yet come, what may yet occur. It's an announcement for you, he tells the prisoners, but it's also for this day, now, in the present, in 1954, he says. If that was true then, it's also true now. "This day" also means December 13th, December 14th, whichever day you happen to be living, in 2020, a plague year, on this day is born a Savior. It means that Jesus is born into whatever conditions you are experiencing, and it means that the message of uplift and hope is available to you now, immediately, today. It means that there is no past calamity, no tragedy, no mistake, no guilt, no betrayal, no fear, no addiction carried on from the past that it cannot be transcended, this day. It means that it is possible to make a new beginning this day. To study the various ways humans are conditioned and imprisoned may leave us feeling pessimistic. To witness the tragedies that make up the human experience on the planet may lead us toward despair. To feel the ways in which we are imprisoned, whether literally or metaphorically, may lead us toward paralysis. But the announcement of the angel, spoken to you and to me on this day, restores confidence that it is possible to take heart, to have courage, and to allow our lives to become torches that blaze, for good news has been spoken to us. This is the day that the Lord has made, and so let us rejoice and be glad in it. On this day is the Christ child born to us.

And finally this. Unto you is born this day... *a Savior*. That's what the angel says to the shepherds, it's what Barth speaks to the captives in the Basel prison. It's what I emphasize to you, sheltering at home. The one born unto you, this day, is a Savior. I openly confess that I'm often uneasy about that word, because it ascribes too much agency to an extra-human something or other, and too little agency to the people in need of saving. I openly confess that I've often dreamed of preaching a sermon entitled "Against Salvation," in which I would launch a massive broadside against certain notions of salvation. That's because those narratives, those theologies, seem to imply that we need to be rescued from the human situation, yanked out of it, as if there was another place, another earth, that we could and should be yanked into. But no. That's not the way the story runs. For the Savior the angel announces is born into the human condition, not outside of it. The Savior the angel announces does not fundamentally alter or tamper with the limitations of space and time imposed upon us all. Bethlehem remains Bethlehem, the Basel prison remains a jail, and Christmas of 2020 shall be remembered as the holiday celebrated against the backdrop of a pandemic. You and me – we still have to function in the cells we inhabit, which is to say, under whatever conditions life imposes upon us.

And so perhaps it's something like this: perhaps the Savior is born that we might become reconciled to the limitations of our humanity. Perhaps the Savior is born that we might forgive ourselves our defects, that we might embrace our creaturely imperfections, that we might tolerate our mutual insufficiencies. Perhaps the Savior is born that we might become patient, and gracious, toward our inability to control our circumstances. Perhaps the Savior is born that we might become gracious unto ourselves, and unto one another, we who are all of us together swept along by the same currents, we who are all of us together groping about in the dark. Perhaps the Savior is come in order to gentle our hearts, to take our hands, and to let us know that no matter the prison we're in, no matter the walls that may confine us, no matter the darkness of the

moment, God is in it with us, providing us with the courage and strength we need in order to endure. Perhaps the Savior is come that we might know we are never alone, that we have not been abandoned, that no matter how dark the night, Someone is there who cherishes us, who loves us, enough to watch with us until the night is ended. Perhaps the Savior is come that we might be introduced to a love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things, a love that is itself the name of what it is to be human.

I thank God that Karl Barth found his way to the Basel prison those many weeks. I thank God that he exhibited the strength of spirit and mind to stand against the dark political currents of his time. And I thank God that he heard the announcement of the angel as directed to him, to you, to me, in the circumstances in which we are all bound: “*Unto you is born this day...a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.*” May it be so for you on this day, and in all the days to come.