



February 19, 2023
Rev. Dr. Thomas Evans
Isaiah 60:1-5
Marking the Hours with Prayer:
Lauds



Golden Verse

“As you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Ephesians 5:19-20

*Oh, what a beautiful mornin'
Oh, what a beautiful day
I got a beautiful feelin'
Every thing's goin' my way*

A week or so ago Curly McLain's opening song to *Oklahoma* started echoing in my head. It was after I heard the story of Lynne Cox. How does the morning function for your day? Is it time to race out the door? Or a time of praise, centering, and hope? Lynne, from California, begins her day in a way beyond mere mortals but it provided the venue for the most beautiful of mornings.

When Lynne Cox was 17 years old, she'd already broken several world records for long-distance swimming. She'd crossed the English Channel twice and always trained. One morning, she was swimming in the ocean off Seal Beach, California, before the sun was up.

This was her normal training routine! This is the gift of Lauds – of rising just before the first rays creep above the horizon – anticipating the new day, a rebirth of opportunity, another day to revel in the gift of life.

Perhaps each morning should be greeted with those words of the psalm with which we opened worship this morning – it is the equivalent to Curly's declaration of joy, but with a focus on

God, *“This is the day that the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it!”*

Clearly Lynne reveled in the gift of life. Along with a strong body and a focused mind, she had the drive to make the most out of the hour of Lauds.

...as you swim and look down it is something like gazing at an infinite abyss making you feel as if you are in utter solitude at peace in all the world. But on this day, suddenly she was not alone. She sensed something beneath her. Perhaps a ray, maybe a shark, but a definite presence and it was massive.

As she said:

I felt the water hollowing out around me and felt like something really big was swimming below. And so, in my mind, I'm thinking, oh my gosh, is it a seal? And I'm like, no, it's too big for a seal. I was like, okay, is it a dolphin? No, it's not a dolphin. And then I thought, oh my God, could it be a shark?

She started swimming closer to shore, and this giant something continued to swim underneath her.

Like Isaiah described, she was in a time of thick darkness. As she looked below, she could not see anything.

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It is like the thick darkness of winter. That light that has waned, the clouds that at times never seem to part to bring in the light of day. There are moments for some that simply a ray of light would lift spirits.

In this way the words of Isaiah in the 60th chapter become words to God, praying that we want to know the type of morning described here; for the thick darkness has not yet left us.

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
(Perhaps for some, but not yet for me Lord.)

...and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. (God, bring Your glory, place it upon me.)

For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; (Lord, I have been in darkness, such deep darkness.)

but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. (Yes, Lord, I need this glory, please Lord.)

Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. (On this day I will come to Your light when the dawn of Your liberation comes.)

But the brightness of the coming dawn had not yet revealed the truth of her swimming companion or deadly foe.

But there was an old man named Steve who worked in the bait shop on the pier, and he sort of watched over me and watched what was going on with the water. And I could see him standing under a light on the pier, waving toward me to come, to swim out to him. And at first, I thought, "There's no way." And he yelled at me and said, "Lynne, come here. There's a baby whale swimming with you."

In the midst of her shock perhaps she was ready to go ashore. But Steve told her that:

...the baby whale would follow me and possibly could run aground. And the weight of his lungs on the beach would kill him. But he also thought that, maybe the baby whale will just swim off and be totally lost. So his idea was that, you just need to stay with the baby whale.

Lynne was experiencing the awe and wonder Isaiah described, *"Your heart shall thrill and be glad."* Swimming with a whale! But in the thrill and privilege of the moment came a sense of responsibility for that whale.

Zechariah understood this well, we will hear his song during the anthem later. It was the gift of knowing he would have a son named John, given so late in life, he would become a servant, so he proclaims, *"that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days."*

This is the calling, since each is the day the Lord has made we are to live a holy life each and every day; and that means *this day* that you have arisen and prayed this prayer to set you on the right path.

God reminds us that we are "saved to serve". The gift of the resurrection is the gift that lifts us out of our belly button gaze into a world in need of God's justice. This is the great gift of the Presbyterian understanding of salvation; since every part of it belongs to God, we cannot mess it up, so we no longer need to focus on it. Christopher Dawson, a Roman Catholic historian, writes, *"It was Calvin and not Luther who inspired Protestantism with the will to dominate the world and to change society and culture."* In turn we focus on being a part of the transforming this world, as our Book of Order

explains, *“Into a provisional demonstration of the kingdom of heaven here on earth.”*

Remember Zechariah was praising God for the gift a child, not Jesus, but his child to be born, John the Baptist, who served to hold people accountable to how they treated and dealt with others. So, to pray Zechariah’s prayer is to be seeking those same victories which God’s prophets sought – freedom of God’s children, justice for the poor, and the restoration of our relationship with our neighbor and with God. Because we wake up remembering the gift of salvation, we arise free from self-concern into a place of service for others.

Lynne had left self-concern behind.

For the next five hours Lynne Cox swam with the whale trying to find the baby’s mother. Truly risking her life swimming further from shore; and if she gets too tired, she might not make it home. But she had been bonded to this whale’s fate with the belief and hope only a 17-year-old can have. And fishermen were directing her, helping find the mother. But the whale helped her too. Sensing she was not as strong the whale swam right in front of her so that she was pulled forward in her wake. Finally, now at almost the 7th hour, they found the mother.

...she came right next to me. And you know, when a mother whale comes next to you, it's like a bus pulling up beside you. And I backed away some because I was afraid. I mean the animal's 40 feet long, 45 feet long. And to be in the water with something so huge is frightening. ...So I saw them together and it was one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen in my life, to see the mother and baby reunited. ...I thought, "I'm going to touch her, too. I'm just going to do it, because I feel like a part of this whole thing." And I touched her, and I could feel that she felt my hand on her. And it was amazing

because she was so big. And how does that whale express happiness? But I felt that she was happy. And then a few minutes later, they swam off.

Lynne liberated that baby whale from isolation and death in the early hours of Lauds. The joy of this time is tied to the power of the empty tomb which was discovered in those same hours. As the light comes into the morning of the new day so too does the joy of resurrection. Zechariah says this right at the beginning of his canticle, *“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.”*

As these hours changed Lynne forever so too can your morning be changed through prayer. Amen.