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Abington Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 25:1-10

Luke 21:25-36

WHEN REDEMPTION DRAWS NEAR

Carson Brisson, who teaches biblical languages at an extension of my seminary alma mater, writes of a portion of his daughter's high school experience from some years ago, which I have modified to share with you. The house lights dimmed. Hundreds of people rustled in their seats. The curtain rose, and the fourth and final evening of the high school presentation of "Big River" began. For a long stretch, the musical, based on Mark Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, ran its scripted course. Then for one moment and forever, it did not.

Jim, a runaway slave, and Huck, fleeing an - abusive father, were floating amidst gently undulating cardboard waves of the Mississippi River. A cable, mostly unseen, pulled their tiny vessel from stage left toward center stage. Foil stars glittered in the midnight sky close over their fugitive heads. Jim had just spoken a line, and was waiting for Huck's response. Before it came, however, the electricity to the school failed. It didn't simply flicker. It just ceased, all of it, all at once. Actors and audience were immediately pitched into stunning darkness and unplanned silence. No one moved, except in the control booth where the sophomore responsible for lighting reacted swiftly, understandably, and incorrectly by shoving all available channels on the control console in front of him to maximum strength. This accomplished nothing until, approximately seven seconds after it had first failed, the electricity surged back into the school producing a wave of - ferociously white light that washed through the auditorium bleaching everything in its path. Everyone reeled back in their seats, let out a collective gasp, began blinking like baby seals, and wondered what might be next. Their wait was short.

On stage on the raft, the character of Jim was being played by an experienced junior, Joshua, who had three former major stage roles to his credit. He maintained his position and poise throughout the brief blackout, and remembered that the next

line of dialogue belonged to his raft-mate. Huck was being played by a newcomer, a senior named Luke, who had never even auditioned for a part before landing this plum role. Luke's only accomplishments before his dramatic debut had been an earned reputation for disrupting any organized event he wandered into, and the record number of in-school suspension days he had earned. That he had been chosen for the part of Huck had caused no small stirring of the school's - thespian waters. There had been lots of talk, and even a called closed meeting, where resignations had been threatened before it was decided that the show must go on.

So it was that on the night the lights went out in the auditorium, Luke happened to have the first word when they returned, and he made the most of it. Maybe his renegade ways had prepared him for quick thinking in moments of particular confusion. Maybe he had broken enough things to know how to fix a few. But, for whatever reason, with perfect timing, the instant after the lights burst back on, Luke, that is Huck, placed his hand on the shoulder of a surprised Joshua, that is Jim, looked boldly toward the control booth, and in a steady, loud voice, pulled these words out of the air: "Brother! Did you see that? Did you see that? Sunrise sure comes all bright'n sudden like...I tell you it does...I tell you it does... if only your river's big enough!" Joshua understood that the scene was being saved and he knew what to do. He said nothing, but simply turned slowly and directly toward the audience, and waited.

Applause erupted. Cheers rocked the room. People, including a few teachers, stood, understanding that in that moment, Luke had been transformed from outsider to insider, right before their eyes. Above the stage, the scattered constellations of foil stars witnessed the glad pandemonium. Luke's father and grandmother were seated in the parents' section. Luke's father was not able to stand. Luke's grandmother leaned forward on her cane, struggled to her feet, stood the full length of herself, finding herself in seventh heaven.

Luke was the toast of the cast party later that evening. At the annual drama banquet, he was elevated to a starring role. The evening of the last Monday of the school year, Luke surprised his father and grandmother by announcing that he had decided to go to the senior picnic. They both gladly arranged their work schedules

for him to have the car. Luke knew the rules given the vehicle's importance in his family system, and was almost always, uncharacteristically, good at following them. His father and his grandmother were, therefore, only a little upset when he missed curfew that night. For several hours after that, they tried to hide their growing concern from each other behind feigned anger, right up until the police officers came to their door.

The night of commencement, the auditorium was packed, and the electricity did not fail. There were several student speakers, with the final one having been chosen by the senior class. As she finished her brief remarks, she promptly produced a white, long-stemmed rose, walked to the empty chair where Luke would have sat, and without drama, placed it there. She picked up two more roses, went over to Luke's father and grandmother, who were seated between the principal and assistant principal, embraced the mourning family members and then gave them each a rose. She then turned to her peers in the graduating class. "Sunrise," she said, addressing them in a steady, clear, gentle voice, "sunrise sure comes all bright'n sudden like...I tell you it does...I tell you it does...If only your river's big enough." ¹

Someone else named Luke offered an - interpretation of what was happening through the lines of a gospel account named after him. It was written in time as if the lights had gone out - a gloomy time of turmoil, confusion, and loss. The temple in Jerusalem had recently been destroyed and the early church was being persecuted by Roman officials. Followers of Jesus Christ were anticipating Jesus' return. Their expressions at times were put in apocalyptic language of cosmic turmoil, as they longed for an outcome that would demonstrate God's victory over evil and death. There are those today whose personal losses and frustrations may make it feel like the end of the world, at least as it has been known. When troubles increase, there tend to be speculations in some religious arenas about the approach of last things. Frequently, sadly, what is shared is based more in fear than in hope. However, Jürgen Moltmann, a German theologian, has written that Christian descriptions of end times are actually about God's new creation of all things. He goes on to note, "What it is, I do not know, but I have confidence that the new beginning will find me and raise me up." ²

The beginning of the Advent season is a time to be reminded that our ultimate redemption is in the Christ who comes to us. When we anticipate our redemption drawing near, we need not be afraid of what God will do. Rather we lean forward into hope as we prepare to see and meet the Lord. If the last two thousand years are any indicator, it seems likely that the end of our individual lives may well come before the return of our Lord. However, we do well to be ready for the end, whether that event comes as suddenly as a car wreck or through a long illness or through some cosmic event. As people of faith, we affirm that what awaits us beyond what we have known is a sunrise of eternal dawn that overcomes all the gloomiest of times and events. With that hope, I hope we can recognize that there is a big river of redemption on which we float. It can move us in our current lives, and that river of God's redemptive flow only increases in whatever lies beyond this life. Sunrise can come all bright'n sudden like, I tell you it does, if only your river's big enough. My friends, God's river of redemption is plenty big enough for us all. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Carson Brisson, excerpted and edited from "Intermittent Light," Focus Magazine, Fall 2009, pp. 22-23.

² Jürgen Moltmann, The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology, Augsburg Press, 2004.