

With Us, For Us

Isaiah 9:2-7 and Luke 2:1-14

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While I sometimes ask why we are spending money on several streaming services, the film *Nyad* convinced me that I am not ready to let go of Netflix.

Starring Jodie Foster and Annette Bening, *Nyad* offers a powerful telling of the fierce commitment of Diana Nyad who embraced the massive challenge of swimming the 100 miles that separate Havana, Cuba from Key West, Florida.

Moving arms and legs through water for 60 consecutive hours is not something I imagine any of us dream of doing—and even more so after four unsuccessful attempts.

But Diana Nyad could not let go of believing her body could carry her through the waters without a tank protecting her from sharks swimming alongside her.

The failed attempts depicted in the film are heart-wrenching, making you wonder why this woman would want to continue battling a mix of salt water, commanding waves, and poisonous jellyfish while trusting those on the boat accompanying her to fend off sharks. But Nyad keeps moving one arm in front of the other until finally, the coast of Florida is visible on the horizon.

As she inches closer to the shore, it becomes clear that Nyad's breathing is as shallow as the water. It then comes time for her to stand and walk through the water until both ankles are above the surface. Everything about her body is labored at this point while her swollen face and eyes reveal what salt can do to any tender surface.

With about ten feet remaining and confidence waning, her friend and coach, Bonnie Stoll, jumps in the water, stretches out her arms toward Nyad and says, "Come towards me. I am right here. Keep coming. I am right here. Keep coming. I've got you" until finally Nyad is out of the water and collapsing in the arms of the person who has been with her each stroke of the way.

It is powerful practice to ponder the adversity we can push through, the places we can get to, and the hope we can hold on to when we know someone is with us and for us.

When you pass through the water, I will be with you.

The waves will not overwhelm you.

I am right here.

Keep coming.

I've got you.

I am with you.

The people to whom Isaiah writes are living through the consequences of failed Assyrian power that has led to them being brutally oppressed.

Resources are restricted.

Movement is monitored.

Military might has revealed its capacity to take and destroy instead of give and protect.

Hope is hard to muster.

And joy, even if embraced as an act of resistance against the forces of despair, is all but impossible to feel, let alone sustain.

But God has not abandoned the people of Judah.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.

The rod of the oppressor is being broken.

The boots worn in war are being burned.

What the people most need is now because a child has been born.

When the Judeans heard the word “child,” they would have immediately thought about the standard Judean ideology, an ideology “which believed that the king was reborn as God’s son at the time of his coronation.”¹ And, indeed, this royal agent about whom Isaiah writes is bestowed with all the names we regularly use for God: “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

Through this agent, authority grows instead of diminishes.

War is replaced with endless peace.

And the one on the throne is known not for greed and oppressive ways but for the justice and righteousness that flow through his power.

The exilic period of abuse and suffering is finally over!

It’s time to return home and experience restoration.

I wonder if King Hezekiah had to coax the people living in darkness into believing that peace and prosperity were again possible.

After all, how does one embrace freedom when one has only experienced bondage?

How does one grasp the power of life filled with light when one has only known how to stumble around in the darkness?

How does one summon the capacity to hope when there are so many tangible reasons to feel hopeless?

I suspect Hezekiah had to regularly dwell *with* the people and care for them in a way that revealed how he was the antithesis to his father’s failed leadership before the people he was called to govern began to trust him in a way that enabled them to exchange their despair for joy.

What about us?

How do we believe a light has come for all the people when there is so much darkness in the world ranging from the violence in our city to fierce fighting that has impacted the region where Jesus was born in ways we cannot begin to imagine?

How do we lean into joy when our steps have been punctuated with despair?

How do we seize wholeness when we have been paralyzed by fear?

How do we embrace grace when we have only known how to sit with shame?

How do we claim our belovedness when we have only heard that we are not enough?

How do we keep moving when the odds are seemingly stacked against us?

Throughout scripture, Yahweh has a fierce capacity and resolve to bring about a newness that is completely fresh, a reality that represents the complete break from all that has come before, a transformation of people and systems that would have once been rendered impossible.

And while our world has had some leaders who have paved a path for peace, none of us have experienced a world of endless peace where justice and righteousness are the norm forevermore.

¹ Susan Ackerman in *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible* (Abingdon: Nashville, 2003).

But everything changed on this night when a child was born in a borrowed barn in Bethlehem—a child born *for us and is with us!*

Christopher Seitz explains how the repetition of the Hebrew word translated “for us, to us,” in Isaiah 9:6 evokes the promise of the name *immanu* which means “with us” and from which we get *Emmanuel*.

Beloveds, Jesus was born for us and to us.

And Jesus reveals how God is always with us.

Emmanuel has come.

God is with you.

And God is for you—no matter where you have been or failed to be, no matter what you have done or failed to do, no matter what you have said or failed to say, and no matter whom you have loved or failed to love.

The prophet Isaiah suggests that the people who have walked in darkness can now rejoice “as with joy at the harvest.” Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann explains how harvest is a time when the crops are finally secure from any threat of rain, drought, or destruction. Abundance is finally guaranteed for another season. Provision has come. There is no need to fear.²

Beloveds, while I can quite easily testify that life is so beautiful and life is so hard, I do not know what fills you with fear instead of peace, anxiety instead of wholeness, sadness instead of joy, despair instead of hope.

I do not know what makes you question your capacity to stand, let alone continue walking through currents that are pushing against you.

But I do believe, with every part of my being, that God took on flesh and became one of us.

Hope has come. His name is Emmanuel.

Joy is ours as we push our way through every source of fear or despair because God is with us and for us!

Can you imagine God standing before you with God’s arms outstretched—not as a baby cooing from a manger—but as a Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, a Perfect Parent, and Prince of Peace.

Can you hear God saying to you, “Come towards me. I am right here. Keep coming. I’ve got you. And I will never ever let you go.”

² Walter Brueggemann, *Westminster Bible Companion, Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 83.