

**“Cavalry or Calvary?”**  
**Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19**  
**November 30, 2008**

Last week, when I was in the hospital waiting to have my surgery, I was laying on my bed watching re-runs of the classic *“I Love Lucy”* television series. As I was watching, one of the nurses came in to check on me, and as she did so, she turned toward the TV and said something like *“They don’t make them like that anymore, do they?”* And this began a short conversation about the lack of quality programming on the major networks these days. We both agreed that if and when we have any precious spare time to watch anything, it tends to be re-runs of classic shows like *“I Love Lucy”* or classic movies like those shown on Turner Classic Movies and American Movie Classics.

It’s funny how no matter how many times you have seen them, there are certain shows or movies that you will watch again, and again and again. For me, in addition to *“I Love Lucy,”* another thing that I will pretty much always stop and watch if I have the time, are those classic old John Ford westerns. Do you remember those classic old films like *Fort Apache and Rio Grande* that really made stars out of men like John Wayne and Henry Fonda?

One of the things that made these classic films and shows so great, and one of the main reasons that we will watch them over and over again is that fact that more often than not they followed a certain formulaic pattern. The good guy wears the white hat, and the bad guys dress in black. The good guy gets the girl, and no matter how scary and impossible things might seem, you always knew that just in the nick of time, you would hear the bugles blowing and the cavalry would come charging over the hill to set things right. One of the reasons I love those old movies so much is because of the assurance that I find with the certainty that everything is going to work out in the end.

Wouldn’t it be great if every time you found yourself in desperate trouble or dire need that you could count on the cavalry to come charging over the hill to set everything right? Wouldn’t it be great if like in the classic old movies and TV shows we all had some assurance that at the end of the day everything was going to turn out OK? This is, in essence the same question that is being asked by the Psalmist in this morning’s scripture lesson.

At the time that this Psalm was written, the Israelites found themselves in a real mess. Hundreds of years before, they had been taken captive by the Assyrian army and were carried off to live as slaves in exile. Homeless, powerless and brokenhearted, the Psalmist cried out to God saying, “*Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, thou who leadest Joseph like a flock! Restore us, O God; let thy face shine, that we may be saved.*” [Psalm 80: 1, 3] The children of Israel were looking for a solution to their problems and a cessation to their suffering.

But what strikes me most about his Psalm is the tone of the writer. And that tone is assurance. Give ear, O shepherd of Israel. Restore us, O God, let thy face shine, that we may be saved. There is no doubt in the author’s mind that God will step in and make things right. They didn’t write, “*Hey God, listen up if you have a spare moment,*” or “*I hope that you might be able to lend us a hand.*” Like you and I watching one of those old westerns, wondering how the good guys are going to get out of trouble, but being sure all the while that their troubles will be resolved when the cavalry inevitably comes charging over the hill, the Psalmist cries out to God with absolute certainty that some day, somehow, at some time God will take care of them.

And as we all know, a few hundred years later, just in the nick of time, God sent his son Jesus into the world, saving us all from the enemies within and without that would do us harm. And that’s why this particular scripture was chosen as the first reading in the season of Advent. For Christians today, even as we suffer and struggle through dark and difficult times, we have in Jesus’ birth, and our Christmas celebration, the absolute promise that God will set everything straight in Christ.

We see the power of God’s love, and the assurance of God’s grace alive during these 4 weeks as at no other time during the year. Even as the days get shorter, the lights seem to shine brighter at Christmas. It’s as if the Psalmist’s prayer, “*Restore us, O God; let thy face shine, that we may be saved,*” is answered as God’s presence shines through the spirit and the celebration of the season.

And so during the season of Advent, we are able to discover an unusual spirit of comfort and assurance as the love of God shines down upon us at Christmas. And basking in the light of God we are able to see things in a new way, as we see lives changed and troubles calmed by the loving presence of God.

During the 2008 presidential race, John McCain was asked by *Time* magazine to share his “personal journey of faith.” In his article, McCain shared a powerful story of something that occurred while he was a prisoner of war in Vietnam:

*“When I was a prisoner of war in Vietnam...my captors would tie my arms behind my back and then loop the rope around my neck and ankles so that my head was pulled down between my knees. I was often left like that throughout the night. One night a guard came into my cell. He put his finger to his lips signaling for me to be quiet and then loosened my ropes to relieve my pain. The next morning, when his shift ended, the guard returned and retightened the ropes, never saying a word to me. A month or so later, on Christmas Day, I was standing in the dirt courtyard when I saw that same guard approach me. He walked up and stood silently next to me, not looking or smiling at me. Then he used his sandaled foot to draw a cross in the dirt. We stood wordlessly looking at the cross, remembering the true light of Christmas, even in the darkness of a Vietnamese prison camp.”*

You see, Jesus birth at Christmas reminds us that God has a way of showing up at just the right time to make things right, just like the cavalry in those old western movies. And it’s funny, because quite often when I’m preaching or teaching about Jesus giving his life on Calvary, I will get tongue tied and want to say cavalry. Then I flip and flop back and forth between the words trying to make certain that I’ve got them straight. But as I think about it, cavalry and Calvary have a lot more in common than just a shared set of letters. They also share the same purpose as both the US cavalry and Jesus sacrifice on Calvary have the ability to save us when we feel that all is lost. Cavalry or Calvary, it’s all the same.

And so for these next few weeks, as you continue to hear the news reports about a struggling economy, high prices, and the war that seems to have no end, as you worry about your health and the health of your loved ones, as you struggle with your kids and wonder if your job will be around this time next year, look at the lights of Christmas and sense the loving face of God shining down on you. Listen to the sound of Christmas music ringing in the stores, in your car, and in our worship. And hear it like the sound of John Wayne’s cavalry bugler sounding the charge, reminding you that in Christ, God is on the way, and everything will be OK. Amen.