

## **“Are You There?”** **Luke 1:67-79**

Some of you may be familiar with an organization called DoSomething.org.

It’s one of the largest organizations in the world for young people,  
and they communicate with young constituents,  
not by mass mailings or glossy flyers,  
but by text messages,  
because that is how young people communicate.

So, over the last couple of years, they have initiated a plethora of charitable campaigns,  
and, through text messages, they enlist the help of young people to successfully accomplish the projects –

things like donating over 1 million pairs of jeans in a single year, enough to clothe half of all youth in homeless shelters in the United States,  
things like registering more than 350,000 new voters in the last several years,  
things like making and mailing more than 40,000 Happy Ramadan cards, which were distributed to every mosque in the US,  
things like cleaning up more than 3.5 million cigarette butts to protect the planet.

That’s amazing . . .

and most of these projects were coordinated through text-messaging.<sup>1</sup>

But there’s one weird side effect.

Every time they send out a text message,  
they get back a few dozen text messages in reply having nothing to do with collecting jeans or registering people to vote or protecting the planet –  
but instead text messages from young people about being bullied,  
text messages about self-esteem,  
text messages about being addicted to drugs.

And the worst message they ever got said exactly this:

“He won’t stop raping me.  
It’s my dad. He told me not to tell anyone.  
Are you there?”

They couldn’t believe this was happening.

They couldn’t believe that something so horrific could happen to a human being,  
and that she would share it with them –  
something so intimate, so personal.

And they realized they had to stop trying to put band-aids on those issues,  
and so they launched Crisis Text Line.

And now every day, at lunch time, the girl who is sitting at the lunch table  
and you’re thinking that she’s texting the cute boy across the hall,

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<sup>1</sup> See their website at <https://www.dosomething.org/us>

is actually texting them about her bulimia – “Are you there?”

Or they get things like,

“I want to die.

I have a bottle of pills on the desk in front of me.

Are you there?”

And so the crisis counselor who *is* there texts back,

“How about you put those pills in the drawer while we text?”

And they go back and forth for a while.

And the crisis counselor gets the girl to share her address,

because if you’re texting a crisis line, you want help.

So she gets the address and the counselor triggers an active rescue while they’re texting back and forth.

And then it goes quiet . . . 5 minutes . . . 10 minutes . . . 15 minutes . . . 20 minutes.

Then, after no response from this girl, the next message is received 23 minutes later, and it says –

“I’m the mom.

I had no idea, and I was in the house, we’re in an ambulance on our way to the hospital.”

The next message comes a month later, this one from the girl.

“I just got out of the hospital.

I was diagnosed as bipolar, and I think I’m going to be OK.”<sup>2</sup> . . .

and she will be OK because someone *was* there.

Someone, by the tender mercy of God, *was there* to provide a glimmer of light to someone else who was sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death.

And as I read this Advent passage from Luke’s gospel,

I am heartened, encouraged, that God has looked upon our planet’s pitiful plight,

and inspired a man who had been unable to speak for at least nine months

to burst forth in song with a proclamation that Someone, a Savior,

would “be there” to offer hope and peace to us.

So convinced is Zechariah of a new world that is to be born

that he twice mentions that people will be saved from their enemies . . .

and Zechariah announces that his child would be there

to prepare the way for the Bright and Morning Star to dawn from on high

in order to give light to those of us who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

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<sup>2</sup> from a Ted Talk by Nancy Lublin, entitled, “The heartbreaking text that inspired a crisis help line,” at [https://www.ted.com/talks/nancy\\_lublin\\_the\\_heartbreaking\\_text\\_that\\_inspired\\_a\\_crisis\\_help\\_line/transcript?language=en#t-124480](https://www.ted.com/talks/nancy_lublin_the_heartbreaking_text_that_inspired_a_crisis_help_line/transcript?language=en#t-124480)

And yet, I wonder how many of us actually grasp the consequences of Zechariah's prophetic pronouncement,

because, even though the promised Messiah would be born whose teaching still tells us to love our enemies (6:27),

how many people are there who are actually prepared to do it? . . .

and, as a result, our feet are not guided on the way of peace but to the toxic trenches of hatred and hostility.

Although the angels greeted the Messiah's birth with a chorus of "peace on earth" (2:14),

the Savior would later weep over the holy city of Jerusalem, because they did not know "the things that make for peace" (19:42) . . .

and consequently, in far too many of our own cities, far too many of us are reluctant to be guided in the ways of peace,

and so is anyone there when the bony fingers of poverty drag our fellow human beings into dark alleyways,

or when prejudice and racism slither from the sewer to pollute the community,

or when acts of justice are corrupted by iniquity or inequity.

Even though the prophets anticipated the day

when swords would be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks,

and when weapons would be transformed into instruments of agriculture

is there anyone there to bring light to those who are sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death at a high school in Michigan,

or in other place in our country where a mass shooting has occurred.<sup>3</sup>

Today, December 5, is the 339<sup>th</sup> day of the year,

and our country has endured 653 mass shootings in which four or more people have been killed or wounded by each act of gun violence,

almost two mass shootings per day.

Are you there?

Are we really serious about being there to learn the lessons of our Lord, so that we may be guided in the way of peace and bring light to those who sit in darkness? . . .

because, if we are, then we can listen to the blacksmiths pounding on the iron,

reshaping it, melting weapons into winnowing forks,

and breaking the vicious cycles of death, revenge, and retaliation.

Listen for the sound of hammers on anvils guiding us along the way of peace,

where fear begins to dissipate,

where hatred and animosity collapse,

where all people and nations return to their proper vocation —

care of the earth,

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<sup>3</sup> These statistics were published in an online article entitled "How Often Do Mass Shootings Occur? On Average, Every Day, Records Show," by Sharon LaFraniere, Sarah Cohen and Richard A. O'Connell Jr. in the *New York Times*, on Dec. 2, 2015. [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/03/us/how-often-do-mass-shootings-occur-on-average-every-day-records-show.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/03/us/how-often-do-mass-shootings-occur-on-average-every-day-records-show.html?_r=0)

love of creation,  
kindness to our neighbors,  
and a concern for the common good —  
because, through God's powerful love,  
new life, and a new way of living life, become possible.

During Advent, and beyond, we are called to embody Zechariah's vision by *being there*  
to fashion a world where abuse will never be tolerated,  
and where the frightening nightmares of darkness will be erased by God's kaleidoscopic  
visions of illuminating life.

In a world paralyzed by nuclear fear and threats of terrorism,  
during Advent and beyond, we are called to participate in God's mission by being there  
to work for that day when nations will not lift up swords against other nations and no one  
shall learn war anymore.

During Advent and beyond, as the dawn from on high breaks upon us,  
we are called to share in God's work by being there  
to shine the light that melts cold-hearted greed,  
to provide the warm compassion that diffuses fear and indifference,  
and to discover the neighbors  
that initiate community instead of chaos,  
devotion instead of division,  
and hope instead of havoc.

Because Advent is a time of preparation, let us prepare ourselves to be there when God needs  
someone to point out the constellations of recovery to those who are caught in the black holes of  
addiction.

Let us prepare ourselves to be there when God leads us to those depressed souls shrouded in  
cloaks of darkness in order to hide from the light.

Let us prepare ourselves to be there when the darkness of the world wants to devour all that  
is good and right and life-giving, and yet God chooses us, God chooses the church, to shine  
the true Light that has the power to transform the darkness.

So, when by the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high breaks upon us,  
and God calls us to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to  
guide our feet into the way of peace,  
will we be there?

Will we prepare ourselves to be there to shine the light? . . .

because, in the darkness of the world, there was a girl who sent a text-message about being  
abused by her father,

and she ended her text by asking, "Are you there?"

Unfortunately, the people to whom she sent the text never heard from her again . . .

and maybe I'm just being naive,  
and maybe it's just what I want to believe,  
but it is my prayer that the girl is somewhere safe and healthy,  
because somewhere, someone, someone like you, was prepared to be there  
for another person who was sitting in the shadow of death.

So, as believers, are you there?

Are you there to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death?

Are you there to guide our feet into the way of peace?

Are you there to make the world a better place?

Are you there?

This sermon was delivered by Tom Ulrich  
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