

SERMON: “Receive/Give the Gift of Advent Love.”

Rev. Geoffrey M. Ross Sun., December 18, 2011, St. James Presbyterian Church

Has anybody here ever had a Christmas that did not live up to their expectations? Despite all the hoopla and the preparations has Christmas disappointed anyone here? I ask only because we live in a world where there's a billion dollar industry dedicated to creating an idealized expectation of Christmas – one that is made up of “Hallmark,” sentimentalized, manufactured moments: the problem is, real life isn't made up of manufactured moments – it's real and often more complicated than we're prepared to admit. And this is where things get tough because, maybe for you this year it's really rough: maybe – instead of joy and Christmas cheer – your life is filled with sadness; maybe a loved one died, or your marriage ended, or you lost your job; maybe you're dealing with health issues, or depression, or with being alone; and because of this you're not feeling in the Christmas mood – and you're wondering where the Good News that was promised by God is for you this Christmas. You're not alone.

As we discussed last week, the People of Israel had lost their hope that God's promises of redemption would ever come true – in their wait they had either dismissed God's promises as fiction or built them up in fanciful ways to suit their own needs and agendas to the point – in one of the bitterest of ironies ever, as the opening verses of the Gospel of John attests – those who longed for God's Messiah to show up expected him to be all sorts of things – a warrior, a king, a prince – and they wanted his coming to be unmistakable, grand, spectacular that when the Saviour didn't come as any of these things, or in a way that they expected, they rejected Him. And, today, after the news on Thursday of the sudden and senseless deaths of four young people on the side of a snowy road in Alberta – after what is a loss beyond comprehension for their families and friends, and the hearts of those who knew them are broken – we question or lash out at God, demanding to know why something like this could happen? why, if God came to usher in a world of hope, peace, joy and love, isn't the world a better place? And, like the People of Israel, we long for a sign of God's presence, a sign that God cares.

This Advent our lectionary readings have taken us through some pretty tough readings – readings filled with doubt, distress, and despair – but, as I've said before, these readings seem to be echoing the mood that I've encountered over the past few weeks: seemingly, the readings have highlighted the gulf between the fiction of our expectations and what it is that God truly promised us. And, by way of an example, as I was preparing the preaching calendar for this Advent season, knowing that we were going to be holding a service on Christmas Day, I took a closer look at what we think of as the “traditional Christmas readings” – especially the Luke account of the shepherds abiding in their flocks by night. It turns out that once you focus on just the birth narrative – 1 verse in both Matthew and Luke – it barely gets mentioned: but what does get mentioned is the sorry state of the world – a world filled with pain and suffering, violence and heartache.

Briefly, the two accounts of Jesus' birth contain clues as to how bad things were: we are told these things to remind us of what the human condition was when God chose to enter into our world to fulfill His promises – then and now. The truth is; when Jesus was born, all was not calm, all was not bright: the little baby Jesus did not sleep in heavenly peace. From the moment He was born there was a price on His head. Read a little further than the prescribed verses that contain the Christmas story and the horror of what this world can commit is revealed – too horrible to be contemplated by the Christmas specials that have sanitized (santa-ized) Christmas. Why is this? The writers of the Luke and Matthew Gospels could have omitted these details from their accounts – after all, the other two did: but rather than ignore the reality of our world they confront it. But – and this is what those listening in the first Century (and we today) needed to hear – they also underline what God is doing in the world by referencing it back to the promises God made through the prophets like Isaiah in the reading we just heard and the Psalm which starts by singing triumphantly about the coming “servant” Messiah but ends by telling how He will be “rejected” and killed by His enemies.

Again, why is this? Because what they had to say was – and still is – Good News, news that changed the world, news that needed to be proclaimed against the senselessness that passes for our human existence: that if God could enter into a world where unthinkable evil and suffering takes place, then, maybe, Jesus could come to our world – a world where unspeakable horrors are committed daily. And what they were also offering those who were longing for a sign that God would fulfill his promise to restore the world was the almost unimaginable message that by choosing to come into this world of flesh and pain, Jesus was born to die – that by being born Jesus would know what it is to be vulnerable, what it is to be hurt, what it is to know loss and heartache, what it is to know temptation and fear, and what it is to be hated – that He came not to save you/I from our circumstances, but to save you/me in them.

The challenge is that we live in a very different world from the one promised by God. But as people of faith who know that God's promise of a ‘sign’ of His love came to be-with us – came to be Immanuel, God-with us – came true in a stable one cold and lonely night so that He could do the only thing that could bring about our salvation: as an Easter people we know that our hope for the peace and joy that God offers us was bought for us through suffering – through the death of His only Son. Friends, there's no avoiding the shadow of the cross that hangs over Christmas – but what this means is that the Advent gift of love that God gave to the world is more powerful than anything this world can mete out. And, having received the gift of God's love – a love which surpasses anything we know in this world – we are called to respond to this grace by confronting the world by doing our part to make this world a different and better place – by giving to a loveless world the love which we have received from God.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts move us to respond to God's Advent gift of love. Amen