

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Prepare for Joy

Isaiah 40:1-11

Sunday, December 11, 2022

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I recall leading a Christmas Eve service some years ago in another church. It was the end of the service and we were ready to sing Silent Night and light the candles. It was my job to light the first candle in the pews on the left side. Then they would pass it on to the next person, lighting one another's candle.

So, I took my lit candle and walked to the first person in the pew. She was a middle-aged woman I knew fairly well. She had just lost her husband and there was an empty space beside her. I tried to light her candle. I tried and I tried... and it wouldn't light. With tears in her eyes, she said, "Pastor, it fits. It fits. I feel like my light has gone out."

Maybe that's how you or a loved one feels during this season – like your light has gone out. Maybe its grief, sadness, mental illness, family dysfunction, a broken marriage, loss of a job, a bad medical report. For whatever reason, you aren't very merry and bright these days. And as everybody is saying or singing "It's the most wonderful time of the year" you are thinking, "It's the most miserable time of the year."

Church, I know I don't need to tell you that there are a lot of people who don't experience the joy of the Christmas season. Suicide rates go up this time of year. People feel lonelier this time of year. People fall back into addictions this time of year. So even though there are twinkling lights, and we sing "Merry Christmas," and "Joy to the World," and there's hot chocolate and all kinds of fun, there are still a lot of people who are in the dark this time of year. Perhaps you are one of them.

Sometimes bad holiday memories can be the cause of a "blue Christmas." John Denver wrote a Christmas song many years ago entitled "Please, Daddy, Don't Get Drunk This Christmas." Denver wrote it remembering when he was an eight-year-old boy and his father got drunk and collapsed over the Christmas tree. So he sings, "Please, daddy, please, daddy, don't get drunk this Christmas and make mommy cry."

Now you won't be surprised to know that John Denver didn't sell a lot of those songs. But it's an all –

too-familiar situation for many people during the Christmas season. Holiday memories aren't necessarily happy memories for many, many people.

And so, what is God's message for those who are in the midst of a blue Christmas? What is God's message for those who are in the dark this time of year? Well, the Lord speaks through Isaiah:

*Comfort, comfort my people says your God.
"Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low. The rough ground shall become level. The rugged places a plane. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all humankind together will see it. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."*

Are you in pain this Advent season? Do you feel like you're in the dark? Well, here is God's message for you today during this season. God wants to comfort you. God wants to give you peace.

If you're in the dark, maybe it's because you're grieving the loss of a loved one. And as you think about Christmas memories, you realize there is a deep hole in life because a loved one is gone. And it's okay to grieve during the Christmas season. In fact, I came across an interesting quote which really spoke to me. It read, "Grief is not a sign of weakness or a lack of faith. It's the price of love." That's true. And I can relate to that during the Christmas season. I lost my father when I was young and every Christmas that goes by, every Christmas that comes, I think about my father and still wish he was here to see my son. Still wish he was here to be in my life. But he is not. And I feel that grief.

Or maybe for you it's something different. Maybe during the season, your marriage is in conflict. Or your family is in conflict. Or maybe you got a bad report from the doctor and you don't know what to do. Or maybe you're facing a personal battle in your life and you don't know where to turn. And you are confused in the midst of this season when everybody else is singing "Joy to the World" and you don't know how to have

joy. Well, here is a message for you in this Advent season: God wants to comfort you and give you peace.

So this morning, I want to share what Advent truly means. Because what's ironic is that in the midst of Advent, we don't often take a moment just to reflect on the profound nature of Advent and what it reveals about God. So what I'm about to share with you today is going to be helpful for many of you, especially for those of you who grew up in ultra-conservative religious households where every Sunday you left church, it felt like you were beat up. "God can't stand you. And you're an awful person." And when you left church, you felt like you had been to war. And that God is going to follow you every single day and look at everything you do. And if you don't get things right, you're terrible.

I have something to share with you about our God. It's totally going to change how you feel about God. Because this is what Advent means. Listen. **Advent means God cares about you.** Advent means God cares about you. Now, that text from Isaiah is powerful. God was speaking to the exiles, to the Israelites, and they were lost in the wilderness and their hearts ached for a home. They were in the midst of the suffering and they thought their suffering would never end. The prophet Isaiah reminds them God has not forgotten you. Oh, no! You will find home again. And then John the Baptist, in the midst of our Advent season, uses this text to remind us that God is going to provide a way back to him in Jesus Christ. Over and over again in scripture, it's the same message, folks: God cares about broken people.

In fact, there's a beautiful image in this text. I don't know if you caught it. In verse 11, it says that God gathers His lambs in His arms and keeps them close to His heart. If there is a message I want you to receive today, it is this: God carries each of you so close to His heart and He wants to bring you peace.

My son Paul has this train set that he loves. We are going to put it around the base of the Christmas tree this week. He loves playing with it on the floor of the living room. Of course, quite often he runs it too fast and derails it. He tries to put it back on track but it's tricky, as those of you who have trains know. You have to be precise. So, I will say, "Oh no, sweetheart, you can't fix it that way. You have to come down beside it and carefully place the wheels where they are supposed to be. Watch daddy." And I get down beside it and put it back on the track.

That's what Christmas means. God came down from above, came down beside us to repair our broken lives. It couldn't happen from above. God had to come down

beside us. Is your life a wreck? Do you feel like your way off the track? Do you feel like your life is broken? Let me tell you folks, God can repair your broken life. And He can resurrect what is lost in your life. Maybe this Advent you've lost your joy. You've lost your peace. You've lost your hope. Well, at Advent, we are reminded that God can help you find what you have lost.

Right now, we have a bunch of toys all over our living room. Paul loves toys, he loves balls, he loves cars. And of course, we have an entertainment center. And below the entertainment center is what we call the "Toy Graveyard." You know what I'm talking about? Paul is into flinging his arms right now, which is kind of promising. I think he'll have a good golf swing, maybe. But he's flinging everything. Just flinging. And so often, his favorite toys at the moment are flung all over the place. And what happens? They often roll under the entertainment center, nowhere to be found again. And Paul cries and looks at us. And if we're not tired, we'll get down on the floor with him. He's like, "Yeah." And I'll reach down and look at all the dust on the floor. And I'll reach in and grab that ball he loves and bring it out. I've resurrected his lost toy.

I know there are some things in your life that you feel like you've lost. And you don't think you'll ever going to get them back. You think there was a time when you felt joyful. There was a time when you felt at peace. "Am I ever going to feel that way again?" Yes. That's what Advent means. God comes down beside us and brings back what has been lost.

Advent means God cares about you. But oh, let me tell you, **Advent also means God understands you.**

I don't know if you can relate to this, but do you ever get up some days and wonder, "Does anybody understand me? Does anybody know who I am? Does anybody know the pain that I fell?" I mean have you ever had that experience in life when you're going through something and you think, "You know what? I am the only human being on the face of the earth that has ever been through this experience." It's a rather arrogant thing, isn't it? But when we get to that place, we do wonder if anybody understands us.

Advent, from the Latin, means "to come." And here's the amazing thing. It means God comes to experience what it's like to be human. There's a great book called *Flash Points*. In that book there's a great story, a true story about a lady by the name of Patty Moore. Bright woman. When she was 17 years old, she was accepted at Rochester Institute of Technology in New York. And one day she was on a bus in New York in the middle of

winter. And she looked out the window and saw an elderly man struggling with his groceries as he walked across the street. And every step looked like a chore. She noticed as people walked by him, one person bumped into him. It was like he wasn't even there. And at that moment she realized, she was awakened to the fact that elderly people have their own challenges. They have their own difficulties. And so she committed herself when she graduated to help improve the lives of the elderly.

After graduation she joined an industrial design firm and she would make products that were sensitive to the elderly. Every time she made a product, she would ask, "Will this help my grandfather, who can't see very well? Will this help my grandfather with his arthritic hands?" But then she went a step further. You're not going to believe this. She has a friend who's a makeup artist for NBC. And she decided, kind of like Mrs. Doubtfire, maybe, that she would disguise herself as an elderly woman. And so the makeup artist put latex over her face and she looked like an elderly woman. She put ace bandages all over herself and then stockings over the bandages so every move was difficult. She put wax in her ears so she couldn't hear very well and drops in her eyes so she couldn't see very well. She put a lot of band aids on her hands so she couldn't move them very well.

How was she treated? She was ignored, shoved, cheated, ostracized, and even mugged. And she would say, "You know what? In those rare moments when someone would smile at me or even hug me, I felt like it was God Himself embracing me." And that experience totally changed her life and what she did. She influenced politicians. She has influenced society. To this day, her influence on the lives of the elderly cannot be denied. But she would have never understood the elderly unless she became the elderly.

Well, here's the amazing thing about our faith. Our faith is the only faith that dares to claim, that dares to proclaim that God and all of His glory would empty Himself to experience what it's like to be human: to see what it's like to cry, to feel what it's like to bleed, to feel what it's like to hurt, to feel what it's like to be lonely and betrayed.

Many years ago, there was an annoying song that played over and over again on the radio. It was sung by Bette Midler. "God is watching us from a distance." Now if some of you like that song, I'm sorry. God bless you, we can talk later. But not only was the song annoying to me, it is theologically wrong! God does not watch us from a distance. Advent means that we don't have a distant God who doesn't understand us, a God who just

wound up the universe and left. No, we have a God who understands what it's like to cry, to bleed, to hurt with us, and to be sad with us, and be depressed with us.

And what about the cross? Most of our crosses in the Protestant church are empty crosses. No Christ on them. Why? Because we're symbolizing the resurrection. But I'll tell you, I love those faith traditions that have a crucifix with Jesus on them. We need those sometimes. Why? So we remember that God understands our suffering. You see, there's two sides to the cross. Our redemption and God's understanding. Advent means God understands you.

Let me share one more profound truth about Advent. **Advent means God is with you.** That's what Emmanuel means, right? "God is with us." He not only understands us, but He is with us, giving us strength in the midst of the storm, giving us wisdom beyond ourselves. God is with us to turn our trouble into triumph. You see, that's the thing. Not only do we have a God who understands us, we have a God who can turn our rough times in to glory. So if you don't hear any message today, hear that God is with you to give you strength no matter what you're faced with today. God is with you to rescue you from what has taken away courage and joy.

Several years ago, I recall taking our dog out before going to bed. As I was waiting for her on our screened in porch, I heard a flutter behind me. When I turned around, there was a screech owl perched on one of our patio chairs. Its big eyes were just staring at me. It was a beautiful creature. I wondered what it was doing on my porch. Soon it dawned on me that the it could not find its way out. The whole porch was surrounded by a screen, and the only way out was through the screened door that was usually left open. It was clear that it flew in through that open door but it could not find that open door again to get out.

The first thing I did was point to the open door, as if the owl understood human behavior. The owl just kept looking at me with those big eyes. The next thing I did was walk outside the door and try to wave the owl out, "This way! This way!" The owl continued to stare at me. Then I remembered that the porch lights were not on, so I turned them on, and the owl just stared at me. I finally gave up.

As I was walking up the stairs to bed, I thought, "Now, this will preach! The only way I could free that owl and bring it home is to become an owl myself." Isn't that

God has done in Christ? God has become one of us in Christ to show us the way home. The message of Christmas is that God will stop at nothing to show us the depths of his love for us (If you are still wondering about the owl, the next morning the owl was gone. Perhaps another one showed up and guided it out of the porch?).

This is what Frederick Buechner said about this invasion. Oh, I love this. He says, "Once we have seen God in a stable, we can never be sure where God will appear or to what ludicrous depth of self-humiliation He will descend in the wild pursuit of each of us. If the awesome power and majesty of God were present in this birth of a peasant's child, then there is no place or time so lowly or earth-bound that God cannot be present there, too. And this means that there is no place we can go where God cannot find us."

Richard Selzer is a surgeon at Yale Medical Center. He wrote a book entitled *Mortal Lessons*. In that book he tells of the time when he had to go tell a woman he just operated on that her mouth would be twisted and paralyzed forever. In trying to get a tumor out of her mouth, he had to cut a tiny facial nerve. And so he's on his way to the room to tell her. And when he gets there, he's standing next to the bed. On the other side of the bed is the husband. And he asked himself, "Who are these people? What is this mouth that I have made and who is this man?" And then he noticed how they caressed each other gently. And then the woman looked up at the doctor and said, "Will my mouth always be like this?" He said, "Yes, ma'am. I'm so sorry. In trying to cut that tumor out, I had to cut the nerve. There was no other way." And the husband looked down and said, "I don't know. I think it's kinda cute." And then Selzer said, "At that moment, I realized who this man was. He was a revelation of God. A gift from God. Because I noticed at that moment how he bent down to kiss her lips. And he twisted his mouth to accommodate hers so she would know that their kiss would always work."

At Christmas, God twists His divine presence to kiss our needy souls. And what He wants so bad is for us to kiss Him back and say, "I love you, too." This Advent remember, God cares about you. God understands you. And God is with you. Don't you ever forget that.



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