

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian Church on December 24, 2020.

JOY IN THE WILDERNESS

In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Isaiah 4:3

When I was young there was one Christmas Carol that I could not abide. The carol begins “In the Bleak Midwinter, frosty wind made moan; earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone.” These words combined with a tune in a minor key felt like such a downer to me. The feeling it evokes felt more like Lent to me than the joy of Christmas.

This year this carol feels appropriate. It evokes the feelings of many who wonder, how to celebrate Christmas in the midst of the pandemic.

The fifty-year-old small business owner who has obeyed lockdown orders, wonders if his or her life work can survive. It seems somehow inappropriate to celebrate when you are forced to lay off employees.

The man whose spouse died during the last year ponders, "How can I celebrate the holiday season without my wife beside me?"

The young adult who works out of state and can't travel home this year for the first time, wonders can this really be Christmas.

Families who will not be able to gather around packed dining room tables question whether a Zoom gathering really works as a substitute.

The resident of a senior care facility, who has not been allowed a visitor for nine months, worries if the experience of Christmas will only make them feel more alone.

During a normal year there are people feeling “blue” at Christmas. But this year is different. In this year all of us, to some extent, wonder how we will celebrate.

Our text for tonight speaks to this situation. The prophet Isaiah tells us ***In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*** Tonight, I call your attention to the words wilderness and desert. Isaiah calls the people to prepare for the coming of the Lord **in the wilderness**. When Isaiah wrote these words the people of Israel felt that they were living in the wilderness. Some fifty years before the Babylonians had come and conquered Judah. Men, women and children had been forced to gather their belongings and travel to live in Babylon. They were forced to live in a foreign land. They did not know the language or the culture. The Babylonians worshipped many Gods.

The Jews living in exile knew that Jerusalem had been destroyed and the temple built by Solomon had been torn down. It was a time of little hope, yet it was precisely in those circumstances that Isaiah called on the people to make ready for the coming of the Lord.

Five hundred years later these same words were used by John the Baptist. Herod the Great was the Roman's puppet king of Israel. The Romans dominated the nation and laid a heavy tax burden on the Jewish people. The people of Israel saw no possible way to gain freedom.

So often we seem to believe that experiencing Christmas is dependent upon the external circumstances of our lives. Our popular songs tell us what is needed. Bing tells us that we must have snow. Rudolph tells us that we must have presents in order to celebrate Christmas. The great World War II classic "I'll be home for Christmas" points to our belief that Christmas is all about family. You and I could add to the list of the things that we think we need in order to celebrate on this special day of the year. All of these things on our list are externals. We believe that there are a whole host of conditions and props that help us experience the holiday Spirit.

Yet Isaiah and John the Baptist remind us that Christmas does not depend upon the external circumstances of our lives. You and I are to prepare for his coming wherever we might be. "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord."

The truth of human experience is that the coming of Christ happens often to those in trying times.

Remember that young couple who started out their married life in such difficult circumstances. They lived in a land that was occupied by foreign troops. The local king was a quisling who acted without concern for his subjects. The bride was pregnant when the marriage took place. The groom knew the child was not his and considered backing out. Soon after the wedding the bride and groom were forced by the government to make a perilous journey to another city. The accommodations were all booked up and so they ended up staying in a place reserved for animals. It was there in that backwater of a great empire, in the most primitive of conditions, through a woman of no position that Christ entered the world. **In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.**

The joy that the angels proclaimed is not dependent on the conditions of our lives. We cannot create joy. Joy comes as a gift. The truth of human experience is that the coming of Christ happens just as often to those in difficult times and circumstances .

So, it has continued through the ages. It is often the case, that the joy of Christmas becomes most real in the most difficult external circumstances. About the time he was first running for President, John McCain wrote a book called ***Faith of our Fathers***. In this book he recounts the military experience of his family. He tells of his father and grandfather, both of whom were Admirals. He also recounts stories from his own time as a Prisoner of War in North Vietnam. He includes this account of one Christmas Eve:

A week before Christmas, Bud had asked an official nicknamed Bug for an English language Bible. Bug initially dismissed the request with a lie, claiming that there were no Bibles in North Vietnam. A few days later, perhaps remembering that his interference with our practice of our religion had resulted in the Church Riot earlier that year, Bug announced that a Bible,

“the only one in Hanoi” had been located. One prisoner was to be designated to copy passages from it for a few minutes.

As room chaplain, I was given the assignment. I collected the Bible from where it had been left by a guard, on a table in the courtyard just outside our cell door. Hastily, I leafed through its tattered pages until I found an account of the Nativity. I quickly copied the passage and finished just moments before a guard arrived to retrieve the Bible.

On Christmas night we held our simple, moving service. We began with the Lord’s Prayer, after which a choir sang carols, directed by the former conductor of the Air Force Academy Choir, Captain Quincy Collins. I thought they were quite good, excellent, in fact. Although I confess that the regularity with which they practiced in the weeks prior to Christmas occasionally grated on my nerves.

But that night, the hymns were rendered with more feeling and were more inspirational than the offerings of the world’s most celebrated choirs. We all joined in the singing, nervous and furtive at first, fearing the guards would disrupt the service if we sang too loudly. With each hymn, however, we grew bolder, and our voices rose with emotion.

Between each hymn, I read a portion of the story of Christ’s birth from the pages I had copied, “And the angel said unto them “Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.”

The night air was cold, and we shivered from its effect and from the fever that still plagued some of us. The sickest among us, unable to stand, sat on the raised concrete sleeping platform in the middle of the room, blankets around their shaking shoulders. Many others stooped by years of torture, or crippled from injuries sustained during their shutdown stood, some on makeshift crutches, as the service proceeded.

The light bulbs hanging from the ceiling illuminated our gaunt, unshaven, dirty, and generally wretched congregation. But for a moment we all had the absolutely exquisite feeling that our burdens had been lifted. Some of us had attended Christmas services in prison before. But they had been Vietnamese productions, spiritless, ludicrous stage shows. This was our service, the only one we had ever been allowed to hold. It was more sacred to me than any service I had attended in the past, or any service I have attended since.

We gave prayers of thanks for the Christ Child, for our families and homes, for our country. We half expected the guards to barge in and force us to conclude the service. Every now and then we glanced up at the windows to see if they were watching us as they had during the Church Riot. But when I looked up at the bars that evening, I wished they had been looking in. I wanted them to see us- faithful, joyful and triumphant.

There is no wilderness big enough,
Or dry enough
Or dark enough
To stop God from coming to us.

In this year when it may seem like a bleak midwinter,
when many of the normal practices of Christmas are banned,
Christ still comes.
He comes to give us moments of wonder, delight and joy.

While we cannot do many of the normal things, we can respond to the love that God gives us in Jesus. The carol "In the Bleak Midwinter" ends with these words: "Yet what I can I give him: give him my heart."

When we give our hearts in love to the Christ Child, he offers us forgiveness, direction and love. It is Christ's presence that enables us to find true joy in the wilderness.

In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.