

“Blue Christmas”

Reading: Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-11

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When I was a Cub Scout, one of our favorite activities while we were waiting for everyone’s parents to come pick them up after the meeting was to attempt to conquer The Spooky Hallway. There was a hallway on the far side of the church building where we met that would get very dark and was nice and long, so the challenge was to try to walk all the way to the end of the hallway, all the way into the darkness, and then *walk* all the way back to the light end. I’m not sure we ever made it all the way. It was easy enough to get to the dark end of the hallway, with your eyes ready for anything that might come out of the dark and the light to your back and your friends behind you, watching. But when you got to the end and had to turn your back to the dark, when you couldn’t see whatever boogeyman might congeal out of the gloom to grab you from behind, and when the light was in front of you and was so much more inviting, it was just impossible to walk all the way back. We often tried it in pairs, and invariably your companion would get spooked first and start running, and then there was just nothing to do: if he had sensed danger, only a fool would stay behind to get eaten.

You may have your own version of The Spooky Hallway from your childhood, but I’d bet you know the feeling I’m talking about. I admit I *still* get that feeling sometimes if I’m over here at night and no one else is around, and I’m turning off the lights to head home and the furnace starts creaking. That tickle on the back of your neck, that rise in your stomach, that urge to start running back into the light, that sense that unseen, threatening eyes are out there in the darkness, watching you, or unseen fingers are reaching out just behind you. Walking out into the darkness is fine, it seems. But getting back to the safety of the light is another thing altogether.

Maybe it’s something hard-wired into our brains from more primitive times when there really were monsters lurking in the dark, and the light was never just the flip of a switch away. But if we think about the darkness of our world rather than the literal darkness of spooky hallways, hopefully for people of faith the feeling is in some ways the same. Hopefully for those of us who live in the light of Christ, instead of the darkness being a place of fear and unseen threats, hopefully the darkness is a place for us to search with bold eyes because we have the Light to our backs. It’s not that we aren’t in love with the Light; hopefully we’re so in love with the Light that we’re willing to charge out into the darkness to find those who are lost in it and invite them to come back with us into the light.

Someone has observed that Christmas is that time when we are halfway out of the dark. It falls near the winter solstice, right when the dark of night is at its strongest, right before the tide turns and the days start getting longer. So while we associate Christmas with lights of all kinds – Advent wreaths, lighted trees, the star of Bethlehem, a halo of light around the newborn baby Jesus – even though our main focus is the coming of the light, it’s not inappropriate to be aware enough of the dark to look around and see what might be out there. The light came to shine in the darkness, so what’s lurking out there in the dark?

Isaiah 35 tells us a lot about the light, and in telling us where the light will shine, Isaiah also tells us a lot about where we need to be looking in the dark. The prophet Isaiah, living seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus, had a lot to say about how the promises of God would be fulfilled

through Jesus. The writings of Isaiah are filled with descriptions of what the Messiah sent by God would do. Our reading for today is just one example. The whole chapter is a list of the sorts of things that will be restored and redeemed when the Messiah comes, and it's a beautiful picture if you pay attention to what he's saying. It's foretelling the overflow of joy there will be at the coming of the Messiah.

"The desert and the parched land will be glad," Isaiah says. The land that is constantly deprived of water and life will rejoice, because when the God of life arrives in power, the desolate, barren, lonely places will finally have reason to sing. We have a habit of forgetting that the darkness has affected all of creation, not just human souls: even the ground is crying out, waiting for God to come. There will be "streams in the desert," not just a muddy trickle or a fickle and short-lived seasonal rain, but a stream of living water, "bubbling springs." Jackals haunt the wilderness out in places fit for no humans, but those places will instead be filled with "grass and reeds and papyrus," the plants of a fertile marshland where there is water and an abundance of life.

But it's not just about the earth any more than it's just about souls; it's also about lives. The people who have no strength of their own – those with "feeble hands," with "knees that give way," or with "fearful hearts" – "God will come, He will come with vengeance...He will come to save you." Where the darkness has brought desperation and deprivation, God will bring salvation. And then Isaiah gives us some promises that we see more obviously fulfilled during the life of Jesus: "the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped," and "the lame [will] leap like a deer, and the mute tongue [will] shout for joy." We can read about Jesus doing exactly those things in the Gospels. Bodies that are broken or hurting, those who are seen by the world as being defective and therefore easily marginalized, are given hope not just of feeling better or given relief but of being restored and redeemed from the darkness.

But even more than healing and hope, the Messiah promises a redeemed community. We need creation to see the light, and we need our bodies and lives to see the light, but salvation has never only been about saving individuals. Salvation has always included community, because we cannot fully live as God's people without community. There will be a highway through that redeemed land, "the Way of Holiness," and the point of a highway is to allow people to travel safely and quickly. The Lord is strong and He provides safe passage for His people, and so they will not be threatened by wild animals as they travel. They will come to Zion, to the holy place where God meets His people, and they will do so with singing because they are so full of joy.

It's a beautiful picture of the holistic redemption God has promised through Jesus. Your picture of perfection might not look exactly like that – let's face it, we don't worry about jackals and lions, and a garden might be more culturally appropriate for us instead of their marshland – but the idea that God is promising to bring our world, our bodies, and our communities out of the darkness and into the light certainly resonates. We ache for that sort of redemption; our eyes are straining in the dark to see that kind of light.

Next Sunday is our celebration of Christmas; the light has come. And while there's certainly a lot to celebrate, we have to be honest about the fact that our joy is sometimes mixed with at least a little bit of sorrow. Isaiah promised that "sorrow and sighing will flee away," but sorrow and sighing are more persistent in our world than we would like. And as Christians, we should not be hesitant to

tell the truth about the darkness. We shouldn't be in denial about the pain many people are living in, especially at this time of year. Recognizing that many people around us – and even many of us ourselves – are suffering does not mean that we can't celebrate joyfully, because if we aren't aware of how dark the darkness is, we don't recognize how needed the light is.

Last Sunday we read part of the story of John the Baptist, the prophet who acted as the forerunner and announcer of the coming of Jesus Christ. We read his sermon about the coming of the Messiah with His winnowing fork and unquenchable fire to burn the chaff; John was definitely expecting to see dramatic things when the Messiah arrived. But today we read a story from near the end of John's life. He's in prison now because his confrontational preaching crossed the wrong person, and in fact he'll eventually be executed without even the pretense of justice. John has faithfully announced that the work of God is at hand, and he has even seen the moment when Jesus begins publicly preaching that the kingdom has come with Himself. But John also knew all about the prophecies of Isaiah; he knew what sorts of things were supposed to come with the arrival of the Messiah. So here he is, rotting in a prison cell, wondering whether he's gotten it right or not. Maybe he picked the wrong Messiah; there were plenty of them in those days. He decides to send some of his followers to Jesus to see what's going on. "Are you the one to come, or should we expect someone else?"

John is at the point many people come to during the Christmas season, or some other season of their lives. We were promised more than this, God. The coming of the Messiah was supposed to bring such great joy. Streams in the desert, the lame leaping like deer, everlasting joy, sorrow and sighing will flee away. Yes, a lot of that certainly happened in the ministry of Jesus. In fact, Jesus uses those examples as His credentials to send back to John: "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor." But John – and many of us today – was struggling with the fact that there were still haunts for jackals, and there was still thirsty ground, and there were still blind and deaf and lame and mute people, and there was still sorrow and sighing. How can we celebrate Christmas when many of the people around us cannot celebrate? How can we rejoice in the light when so many people still live in darkness? How can we welcome the Messiah when so many people are still waiting in desperation?

It doesn't have to ruin our Christmas celebration to ask such questions. Looking intently into the darkness doesn't have to make the darkness even darker, as long as we keep the light at our backs. In fact, being honest about the darkness can actually show our trust in the light. We take the darkness seriously so that we can remember how needed the light is. We take seriously the cries for help among our neighbors, both inside the church and outside, so that we can have a reason to reach out and invite others to encounter the Light. We pause and remember our own cries from the darkness in our own past so that we can rejoice fully in remembering what Jesus has saved us from.

Our faith is never about pretending everything is okay when it isn't. Jesus our Messiah came to tell us the truth: to point out the parched land, to bring vengeance and retribution so that He can save, to clear space for the highway in the wilderness. We can look fearlessly into the darkness so that we can proclaim the truth about God's power, goodness, and light.

In other words, as we prepare for our celebration of Christmas, we can pause and take seriously the pain in the lives of people around us, or even in our own lives. We don't have to wear painted smiles. The message of Christmas is one of healing and hope, and healing takes seriously the reality of a wound. We can "strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way, say to those with fearful hearts, 'Be strong, do not fear, your God will come.'" Don't fall away, don't give up. Ask the Messiah to remind you of His goodness, to be the Light for you again, to fill you again with His presence.

We all come through Advent from different directions, dealing with different things, with different measures of joy and sorrow. But hopefully we all take seriously the reality of the darkness in others' lives as well as the power and goodness of God's light. Today as we enter the final week before Christmas, I encourage you to pray in one of a number of ways, again recognizing that we all may be at different places on the journey and come into the light having different needs. Some people are in need of anointing and prayer for healing, whether it's their body that needs healing, their soul, or their relationships. Pray for those in such need. Some people are in need of intercessory prayer of another kind: maybe they have financial problems that seem insurmountable, or problems at work, or something else. Pray for those in such need. And finally, you may have a specific person in mind who is in need of hearing about the hope and joy of the light of Christ. Pray that God would give you wisdom and boldness to share that light with them during this season.



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