

The Way

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
December 11, 2016
Third Sunday of Advent – Year A
Isaiah 35:1-10



The church in the downtown Episcopal church gathered as always for the annual Christmas pageant. The priest said this pageant would turn out to be like no other. He writes:

“The manger was down in front at the chancel steps where it always is. Mary was there in a blue mantle and Joseph in a cotton beard. The wise men were there with a handful of shepherds, and of course in the midst of them all, the Christ child was there, lying in the straw. The nativity story was read aloud by the priest with carols sung at the appropriate places, and all went like clockwork until it came time for the arrival of the angels of the heavenly host, as represented by the children of the congregation, who were robed in white and scattered throughout the pews with their parents.

“At the right moment they were supposed to come forward and gather around the manger..., and that is just what they did except there were so many of them that there was a fair amount of crowding and jockeying for position, with the result that one particular angel, a [little] girl...who was smaller than most of them, ended up so far out on the fringes of things that not even by craning her neck and standing on tiptoe could she see what was going on. ‘Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will among men,’ they all sang on cue, and then in the momentary pause that followed, the small girl electrified the entire church by crying out in a voice shrill with irritation and frustration and enormous sadness at having her view blocked, ‘Let Jesus show!’

“There was a lot of the service still to go, but the rector said that one of the best things he ever did in his life was to end everything precisely there. ‘Let Jesus show!’ the child cried out, and while the congregation was still sitting in stunned silence, he pronounced the benediction, and everybody filed out of the church with those unforgettable words ringing in their ears.”

“Let Jesus show!”¹

¹ As told by Frederick Buechner, “Let it Show,” at www.frederickbuechner.org.

Isaiah has been that voice this Advent; the piercing, poetic voice that cuts through the way things are to imagine a day when God will show.

There's often quite a bit that blocks our vision of the glory lying in the manger.

The world remains an unpredictable and frightening place for so many, where wars and rumors of wars are a daily reality. The latest news from the city of Aleppo. Just this week, 80,000 people have fled the city of Aleppo as the Syrian army moves to take the last remnants of it.² These are the people who didn't have the means to flee to try and make their way to Greece. Now they have entered an unknown future. In the midst of such realities this Advent, Isaiah cries, "Let God show!" and when God shows, they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, and they shall study war no more.

Divisions and hostility between neighbors can crowd out our vision of the manger. Many families that gather for the holidays do so with the pain of estranged relationships hanging over the dinner table. Forgiveness seems like a dream, reconciliation a fantasy. I was talking with a friend a few years ago who told me he was spending his holidays at home. "So is the family coming to you?" I asked. "No, our family has decided to not get together this year. Always too much tension." He went on to detail a series of divisions, slights, harsh words foolishly spoken, and hurt feelings. In the midst of such realities this Advent Isaiah cries, "Let God show!" When God shows, the wolf shall live with the lamb, the lion and the calf and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

Sometimes it is hard to see the glory because of the pain. Whether the pain of chronic illness, the pain of grief, the pain of debilitating mental illness – the pain can stand so tall and crowd out all the light coming from the manger, and no matter how hard we try, that is all we see. In the midst of a broken world, Isaiah cries, "Let God show!" When God shows, the wilderness blossoms, the blind see, the broken are made whole, and sorrow and sighing flee away.

A good poet like Henry David Thoreau can be ostensibly writing about a yellow leaf barely hanging on to an oak tree in a stiff autumn wind, but by the time the poet has finished, we see something else as well, something more profound, within that scene.

I am the autumnal sun,

² Reuters News Service, December 7, 2016.

*With autumn gales my race is run;
When will the hazel put forth its flowers,
Or the grape ripen under my bowers?
When will the harvest or the hunter's moon
Turn my midnight into mid-noon?
I am all sere and yellow,
And to my core mellow.*

*The mast is dropping within my woods,
The winter is lurking within my moods,
And the rustling of the withered leaf*

Is the constant music of my grief.³

That is one poetic voice of Advent, the sharp autumnal sadness of not being able to see, of having our way blocked by this thing and that. This poetry must be given voice in Advent, given room to acknowledge the pain of the way things are, that the winter of war and discord and brokenness lurking in our moods feels like it will be the constant music of our grief. Without this poetry we might not ever realize our need.

But there is another kind of poem that is possible, a poetry that refuses to accept that this is the world God intends, a poem that dares imagine another way, that dares to see it and live by it in the present day. Walter Brueggemann says this poetry contains “cadences of home.”

W.H. Auden, in his Christmas Oratorio called “For the Time Being,” writes such a poem:

*We who must die demand a miracle.
How could the Eternal do a temporal act,
The Infinite become a finite fact?
Nothing can save us that is possible:
We who must die demand a miracle.⁴*

“Nothing can save us that is possible.” Is this not our Advent hope, that what is beyond possibility for us can be brought by God? That the wilderness can blossom like the cedars of Lebanon, or the roses of Sharon? That the blind can see and the lame leap? That we can all be brought home to God?

³ Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, 1849.

⁴ W.H. Auden, *For the Time Being*, 1944.

Church, nothing can save us that is possible. So let us join the prophet's cry, "Let Jesus show!" Strengthen the weak hands with your words, make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are fearful in these days, "Be strong! Do not fear." For nothing that is possible can save us.

And what is more impossible than the Infinite becoming finite fact, finite enough to be cradled in a manger?

The highway Isaiah sees, the one on which no one ever gets lost, where God's people are brought home – that highway runs through Bethlehem, it is the highway that Mary and Joseph traveled, it is the highway that led Jesus to the cross, it is the highway that even now runs through this table...the highway home.

At this table, we take our turn on this highway home. We are called at this table to be the Advent prophet, to cry out, "Let Jesus show!", to strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble needs, to say to the fearful, "Here is your God!" Let Jesus show, through you. Let Jesus show, through all the trappings of this season. Let Jesus show, and see if the world, if your world, if you, aren't transformed, and home with God. May it be so. Amen.