

Rev. Jerry Deck
Isaiah 40:1 – 11

December 14, 2014

Roots
No More Tears!

There's nothing like a great cantata to get us into the Spirit of Christmas. Music is always a great way to usher us into this season and get us into a "Christmassy" mood. I've been listening to Christmas music since November 1st. I realize that this may upset some Christmas purists among us, but I feel like 2 months of Christmas music is a great thing. Of course, it's not just music that gets us in the Christmas Spirit. Christmas trees can get us in the mood as well. Last Saturday I went and got a Christmas tree and then I left town for a couple of days and when I returned Megan had decorated the tree with lights and ornaments and a star on top. You can't help but get excited about things when you see the beauty of Christmas trees and houses lit up from the colorful lights. And then of course food and fellowship does a great job of making us physically feel like something special is happening. We gather together with friends and coworkers, circling up around tasty meals including things like chocolate or gingerbread or pumpkin or fudge. It smells and sounds and tastes like Christmas.

And so here we are on the 14th of December, just having listened to beautiful music about the birth of Jesus, seen the Advent Candle lit, hearing announcements about Christmas Eve, thinking about plans for Christmas Day, when all of a sudden we read a scripture passage that talks about, well, death. About how fleeting life is and about how short and temporary our lives are. We are grass, Isaiah says, as fragile as wildflowers. That like those things we will wither and fade. Well, Merry Christmas to you, too!

So, why in the world would we talk about this on an uplifting day like today and in a season like this? One of the reasons it's appropriate is because, while it does talk about death, it also includes the prophecy of one who is coming and who will look after us like a shepherd. He will nurture us and love us. And, as the beginning of the chapter points out, he will forgive us just as he has forgiven the ones to whom Isaiah is speaking, which are the Babylonian exiles. This is, of course, talking about the messiah, about the coming of Jesus. And so we could, of course, just focus on those parts and act like the whole grass and flower and our own demise was not even a part of the passage.

To be sure, that's very tempting, especially on a day like today. I mean, it is almost Christmas, for Pete's sake. And well, a week or so ago, I may have just done that. But that was before 6 days ago when I found myself at a church in the middle of nowhere Kansas, attending the funeral of a family member of mine named Merlin Fields. Merlin was my mother's double cousin which means their father's were brothers and their mom's were sisters. It's a bit weird, but that's how they do things

in rural Kansas! So, while he wasn't technically my uncle, in many ways that's kind of how he seemed to me.

Now Merlin wasn't the mayor or on the school board or CEO of the local bank. He was, for most of the time I knew him, the handyman at the local oil refinery. He'd also, as I found out in his obituary, did some construction work in the past. So, perhaps there was some surprise at the fact that at his viewing, over a thousand people came through to pay their respects. The pastor said she'd never seen anything like it and the funeral director couldn't remember when he'd seen more flowers given. You see the thing about Merlin was that he had a way about things. Merlin was the guy who would make sure every person at a family reunion felt they were involved and they were important. He was the guy who changed a stranger's flat tire, who was a listening ear to a random guy at the gas station, who had carved the advent candleholder that was on the church chancel, who would visit his 94 year-old mother every day. Whether it was on the job or simply walking around in his community each moment mattered for Merlin and he made each moment count. And as I looked around that packed sanctuary on his funeral day it was like seeing a picture of each of those moments gathered together on this one day.

And toward the end of the funeral service, as we stood there singing the song *It Is Well with My Soul*, the tears that began to seemingly flow out of my eyes made it clear that my soul, at least, wasn't buying it, that it didn't feel well. Because all I felt was an incredible loss, for the reality, the harsh reality that Merlin was no longer with us. The grass does wither, the flowers do fade, and you know what? That stinks. And as I thought about that this week, in the context of this passage and this season I was reminded that that there are many of you out there for whom this is the 1st or 2nd or 10th or 20th Christmas without a husband or wife, or brother or sister, or mom or dad, or son or daughter or friend and you feel the weight of that, the weight of the reality that we are grass and flowers, that life is fleeting. And at a time when the society around us would say just act like everything is great, just smile, just sing, go to another party or take another sip of eggnog-don't feel the sadness; that we in the church need to let you and others know that it is okay to struggle in this season. That we are a community where it's okay to be honest about the reality that we are vulnerable, that there is pain and loss that comes from this, and that we don't need to hide from that or act like it isn't the case.

And we do this not in spite of Christmas, but *because* of the fact that we are a Christmas people. The Christmas story is the story of how God has come down to us in the middle of our weakness in the middle of our sin and our pain to, as Isaiah says, give us comfort and hope. We can speak of vulnerability and death at Christmas time not just because it's real, but also because we believe that the Christ that was born on Christmas Day can in order to be with us in in the midst of that. The reason we celebrate the birth of Christ is not because it's fun to sing carols or light candles or go to parties, but because Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection is a light that goes into the dark places of the world and in our hearts and lives. A light which says even in those difficult times when we are most aware of how fragile life

is, there is still hope because of the Christ who was born. And if you are in a place right now where you are struggling with loss or memories of what once was, please know that the Jesus that was born on Christmas Day and the church that was born at Pentecost is here with you, even now.

But, there is one more reason, it seems to me, why it is altogether appropriate to think about our own temporary and finite nature in light of the eternal Christ. Which is that, reflecting on our “grassiness” so to speak, frees us to begin living more fully, not for what is temporary and fleeting, but for the eternal one who was born on Christmas Day. The people who gathered at Merlin’s funeral last Monday were not there to celebrate how amazing Merlin was at watching television, or how loudly he cheered for the Kansas City Chiefs and they certainly weren’t there to rejoice at how big his bank account was. They were there to celebrate how Merlin had shaped them in one way or another, into the person they were. How his Christ-like manner that I experienced and that I heard again and again had changed me and them. Until his funeral each of us had only seen this in part, but last Monday it came into view for all of us to see.

It was a remarkable reminder, in this Advent season, that the way each of us live our lives will come into full-view at the return of Christ. A Christmas people, who focus on the eternal are not afraid to acknowledge that our time here is temporary, which means we can live more fully and alive in the present because our end here is not the end. We can love recklessly, serve others fearlessly and forgive without keeping record of wrongs because we are able to see our lives in light of the eternity of Christ

Sisters and brothers in Christ, in this seasons let us remember that Jesus was born in this world not to distract us from the pain and vulnerability of our lives, but in order to enter into them. Because of that we are free to be honest to God and to one another. And we are free to live into the hope and joy of knowing that we serve the one who was born on Christmas Day and who will return. So let us live as if we truly believe that while the grass does wither and the flower does fade, that the Word of God, Jesus Christ, is eternal. May it be so. Amen.