

"Do We Dare Rejoice?"

Isaiah 35: 1-10

Matthew 11: 2-11

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The Advent/Christmas season is the time of the year when I feel most like I live in two completely unrelated worlds at the same time. One world is the enjoyable but sentimental world of Christmas trees, decorations, holiday foods, family gatherings, lovely worship services, and even (believe it or not) politicians talking about peace on earth. The parallel world is the world of newspaper, radio, and TV programming that continues to be filled with accounts of violence, hatred, mistrust, and greed. Perhaps I am not alone in feeling the glaring contradictions between these two ways of looking at life.

Each year, we are sorely tempted to try to convince ourselves that this time the entrance of the baby Jesus into the world will make some difference. Looking to the scriptures, we find words of prophetic hope in both passages we read today: in Isaiah and in Matthew. A deliverer will come into the world to change things. We in the church, buoyed by these messages, hope that somehow we will be able to generate the warm feeling of peace and joy that then can percolate through the angry and resistant armor that people tend to wear. We imagine that this year generosity will win out over greed, and forgiveness and reconciliation will win out over division and violence. Well, it hasn't happened yet; but we can always imagine that this year will be different.

The only aspect of society that seems to be affected year after year in any direct way by the Christmas season is our consumerist economy. Of course it is true that many businesses only exist because of what they can sell at Christmas, so it is very much in their self-interest to promote the sentiment of the season. But the feelings that motivate us to buy do not represent any sort of real change in life; we end up with the same old world. Nevertheless, year after year after year we develop the expectations, or at least wishes, that something will turn out to be different this time.

The process that I am describing is even true in the church in some ways. We want things to change, but are they actually changing or likely to change in the near future? What events have taken place over the past few years that give you any real reason to anticipate a better tomorrow? Given the evidence, either we are engaging in pipe dreams, or we need to look at this whole process of holiday transformation in a very different way.

I have been struggling with this Christmas question for many years. I became most aware of it in the 11 years I spent as a prison chaplain. Christmas is very different in a prison. All of the traditional reasons and occasions for joy in the Christmas season are notably absent to those who live behind those walls and bars. There are no chestnuts roasting on an open fire. No one sings the song "There's No Place Like Home for the Holidays". Even for those inmates whose families come to see them at Christmas, visits in prison are nothing like the warm family reunions we often look forward to in our homes. Most of the inmates are completely cut off from the kinds of holiday experiences that we take for granted.

Now, I suppose we might adopt a position that those prison inmates really deserve to be deprived because of what they did to be imprisoned in the first place. If however we are followers of Jesus and if we take seriously what he taught, we will find no justification for that judgmental attitude. In fact, Jesus makes it clear that ministry to those in prison is central to those who would participate in the Kingdom of God. As chaplain in that place, it was my responsibility to find ways to minister appropriately without regard to any judgments about the worthiness of those in my charge. From that very first Christmas in 1976 I found myself faced each year with an exceedingly difficult task. How does one talk about the joy and peace of Christmas with any integrity in the setting of a prison?

I realized, of course, that the question about how joy and peace can become a reality in people's lives does not only apply in a prison setting. For example, how do we speak of joy and peace in Darfur where so many are dying from famine and war? How do we wish a Merry Christmas to the thousands of families in our country and tens, maybe hundreds of thousands of families in Iraq, whose soldier-children will never again come home for the holidays? For that matter how can we deliver a happy Christmas message of joy and peace to the 30,000 families in our own country who have lost loved ones to automobile accidents in this past year, many of which have been alcohol related? And bringing it closer to home, don't we need to be very careful about the words of joy and peace that we deliver to those among us who have lost loved ones by any means in the recent past?

The truth is that we cannot change anything by our words. We cannot restore what has been lost. We cannot undo the violence that has taken place. And we cannot rationalize any of it. It is at best grossly inadequate and at worst cruel to point to patriotism, or the promise of heavenly rewards, or the will of God as explanations or justifications for these losses in an attempt to make people feel better. And it is completely crass and unethical of us to try to paint over these losses with

sentimental platitudes of peace and joy. We are faced with a dilemma, and like so many real issues in life, this one is complex.

It does not work to be one-sided in our approach. It is necessary for us to take with us into the Christmas season both of the worldviews I articulated at the beginning of this sermon. In the prison, it was not possible for me to try to manipulate the inmates into an emotional state that was more comfortable to me. I had to begin where they were, in the midst of their own experience. I had to feel the emptiness and the isolation with them as much as I could so they could teach me.

And then, while standing with them, looking from their perspective, I had to help them look for some small but real evidence of the new light of Christ that we celebrate at Christmas. I realized year after year, that while the situation did not change in any large and obvious way, the truth is that something did change. Of course the change didn't only happen during the holiday season. It happened whenever people found a way to open up their awareness to find God in the midst of their deepest disappointments and losses. Often they did find joy, but it was not the superficial, one-sided happiness that we often think of when we hear the word "joy". The joy they found was deeper, more central. It usually represented a very small change in perspective or attitude, but that small change made a huge difference. It was life-changing – life-transforming.

We cannot talk about the experience of rejoicing without considering the meaning of hope. Hoping is not the same thing as wishing. Wishing is always about something that does not exist now. In our wishing, we look for the time in the future when our desires might be realized. Then at Christmas, we can look around us, see the absence of peace and joy in the world, and wish that the coming of the baby Jesus at Christmas might introduce some peace and joy into the situation.

Hope generates a very different experience. Hope is not about the future, it is about the present. And hope is not about introducing some external thing that we think is missing from life. Hope is the affirmation, in the present, of something that is already real. So the situation is not: Before Christ, no joy and peace; but after Christ peace and joy can be found. Our affirmation is different. We look to the entrance of Jesus into the world as a clear statement of God's eternal love. He stands as an undeniable symbol that even in a world torn with violence and hatred, the loving activity of God is at work. Our hope in this reality makes it possible for us to have the courage to get up in the morning. It gives us an ethical foundation so that we can live out the gospel in tangible ways day after day. It allows us to take socially unpopular stances – for example, the radical hospitality that our open and

affirming stance communicates. And everything we do becomes increasingly possible because we know that God is at work in the world in this very moment.

So, do we dare rejoice, now, today, before Christmas even gets here, and do we dare rejoice in the face of so much darkness in the world? You bet we do! We can be just like Jesus' mother. Mary's situation was dire no matter how she looked at it. She was unmarried and pregnant. What economic challenges did that represent for her? And how much social and religious judgment could she anticipate? Plenty, you can be sure. Joseph, too, had many questions about what to do. But rather than despairing, both of them dared to rejoice, because they came to believe that God was at work – in the present.

No matter where we look, whether globally or locally, darkness abounds. But because we affirm that God is at work within and among us, in the present, we find real and lasting hope as our foundation. Light shines in the darkness. So, let us dare to rejoice as we open our doors and our lives to one another and to the loving and transforming presence of our God. We dare rejoice because we know that God's Christmas gift to us – God's gift to the world – is real.