

Good News for Those Dreading the Holiday Season
A Sermon by Missy (Martha) Shiverick
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
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Text: Psalm 25: 1-10
Jeremiah 33: 14-16

It is confession time. This wonderful season of advent often finds me brooding and blue. I mean, no sooner had the upsetting ads for the elections gone off the air, than the ads enticing you to shop for Christmas appeared. You know the ones for Zale's jewelers, where if you are really loved, you should get diamonds for Christmas while sitting around a beautiful Christmas tree with a blazing fireplace in the background. Or the ad for the sporty cars that all really attractive young people should receive as Christmas gifts, and then there are the toys for the good little girls and boys: the tumbling Elmo that is already sold out, the new generation of play stations, and what I would describe from the commercials as violent video games children will be asking Santa Claus to put under their tree on Christmas morning. It is everywhere you go! The first Christmas catalogue arrived at my house at the same time the "back to school" specials were still going on. My neighborhood CVS had the Christmas decorations and toys out this fall at the same time the Halloween decorations were still being sold. Am I the only person who is frantic? They are trying to make this magical, wonderful time of the year, last for two or three months, and the thought of it makes me crazy. This is not a real time. This is not what Christmas is supposed to be. We have let a retail industry reshape a religious season and now they are trying to make it last one fourth of the year. The pressure it puts on us is tremendous. I feel like Charlie Brown in the Charlie Brown Christmas special where he tells Lionus that there must be something the matter with him. It is the Christmas season and everyone is supposed to be happy and he isn't. Well, Charlie Brown, you are not alone.

Another confession I must make here is that sometimes the Christmas songs also make me sad. One soft rock radio station has started playing them non stop since Thanksgiving Day. They speak of peace on earth, this magical time of love filled with gaiety and frivolity and at the same time we read in the news papers last week of a bombing the day after Thanksgiving that killed 110 in Iraq. This peace and giddy happiness seems illusive; something we can read about but can not achieve. And then when you think

of all the men and women in our armed forces stationed over in Iraq and Afghanistan spending Christmas without their families in such very foreign lands and you have to wonder if songs like “chestnuts roasting on an open fire” bring tears to their eyes. Of course it does.

And what about the families who are under stress. What about holiday dinners with families where mom and dad do not speak to each other and you can cut the tension in the dining room with a knife? Or how about the single parent trying to make ends meet on a salary which puts the family below the poverty line who is also trying to make Christmas magic for children? ‘Yes, some children get many toys from Santa because they want them, but you get new boots because you need them.’ And think of the families who suffered the loss of a loved one this past year and are dreading how they are to get through this holiday season. In the book “A Prayer for Owen Meany”, John Irving discusses this in his description that the holidays are the time when we feel so acutely who is not at the table. Who was there last year and is now gone. Who was alive last Christmas, but now is dead.

I hope I haven’t totally popped any of the balloons of you Pollyannas, but the fact is that, if not you, then that person sitting next to you in the pew this week most likely is entering the holiday season with some emotional baggage and is wondering how they are going to put their feelings aside for the next few weeks and enjoy the mistletoe. This season of lights and gaiety also appear to be a dark, dark time!

And then comes the prophesy from Jeremiah. He too lived in a dark time. Jeremiah’s oracles are set in the very moment of the destruction of Jerusalem. Things were bleak indeed. And still, Jeremiah saw something hopeful about the future. Jeremiah was sustained by his conviction that God was in control. Jeremiah believed that the out come of human history was in the hands of God who could be trusted to make the city a place of safety. Jeremiah faced a dark time knowing that God would was still with him. The hope and comfort that is prophesized in this part of the book of Jeremiah is that God will not abandon. Jerusalem might be lost temporarily but leadership will be restored, and a time of security and well being, justice and righteousness will be placed in the world by God.

Listen now for God’s word as it is written in the Book of Jeremiah, chapter 33: 14-16.

The days are surely coming says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."

The word of the Lord... Thanks be to God.

We have a tree in our backyard that is illuminated with lights. We put them up last week and I have been enjoying the twinkling lights beginning at 5pm for a week. It just gets dark so early that it is nice to look out my window and see the lights. I was walking my dogs late in the night this past week in the freaky warm weather. Several people in the village where I live have also put up lights and as I walked I thought what comfort the lights were in this limited sunlit time of year. They bring joy and hope. This came home to me again when I read an article by Joanne Adams, pastor of Morningside Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, in the Christian Century Magazine. She said that she was really looking forward to the first Sunday of Advent this year as she felt that when we light that first candle in the Advent Wreath, it will not be a moment too soon. She has been feeling the urgent need for the light that comes from God in a world that has been at war too long; in a world where voices of division are too loud, and in a world clouded by anxiety over our future.

And into this world Jeremiah's message is a balm. God intends to make the world right again. "The days are coming when I will fulfill the promise I made." Apparently with God, a promise made is a promise kept. Jeremiah looked at the bleak world and saw hope. Jeremiah was sustained by his conviction that things were in the hands of God who can be trusted to provide safety and salvation to us all. And this is our good news in our times of darkness as well. It is the good news for those of us dreading the holiday season. In the scripture passage read by the liturgist this morning, the Psalmist prayed in a time of distress and we too can look to God and expect God to show us the way. God will guide us in our dark times and will lead us. We can live with the assuredness that God does not abandon God's children.

So we can approach the holidays with security and hope. We can be assured that we will not be alone and that God is and will be in control. And as we approach Christmas I also offer three other suggestions on ways to approach

the holidays this year. First, have realistic expectations for them. Not every year is magical and some of them are far from it. Nothing is sadder or more pathetic than the adult who is still looking for that pony under the tree. Realistic expectations allow us to acknowledge that some holidays are not the ones “memories are made of”. If some of you think that walking through these holidays would be easier with another person, please call a me or one of the Stephen Leaders and we will get a Stephen Minister to be there and listen during these stressful days. The second suggestion is to look to God this holiday. We can not escape the cultural celebration this time of year has become, but we can put it in perspective if we remember that it is God’s great gift of hope and love in Jesus Christ that we truly celebrate. Come to church, read the Bible verses assigned each day of advent, and allow yourself to feel God’s presence and promise. The third suggestion is to be God’s light to someone else. This year is hard on most people. Your darkness will be lifted as you show others the light of God through your caring actions. Your love and care might just be the present someone in this church or community needs this holiday season.

Presents sometimes are unexpected gestures which have great meaning. James Howell, a Methodist pastor and author, wrote that an elderly member of his church gave him an old pocket knife from his pocket as a gift one year. The man handed it to him and said that when ever he was having a bad day, he should feel it and remember that someone loved him. At the time he thought it was an odd gift. There were a lot of things he would have wanted more than a used pocket knife and he had never carried one before. It wasn’t what he wanted, but over the years, it has become something of great value to him. He said countless times, he has received the comfort he needed knowing the knife was in his pocket and that it represented he was a loved person. The gift wasn’t what he thought he wanted when it was given, wasn’t what he craved, but it has turned out to be the perfect gift. And the same can be said for God. We do not always get what we want. We can pray each year for something and never get it. Howell writes that it doesn’t take a gift like the pocket knife for us to see that God isn’t so ineffectual as to give us merely what we crave, but that God gives us something infinitely richer. God gives us love, God gives us hope, and as Jeremiah teaches us, God keeps promises and does not abandon us in our times of need. Advent is the time where we experience that promise and begin to live with that hope again each year.

The last Hymn we will sing this morning is O Come O Come Emanuel. It is the perfect hymn to go forth into advent. It reminds us of God's promise of hope and light to an exiled people. We too are this exiled people. We too are waiting in darkness anticipating the light of Christmas which is promised to each of us. And with God, you can be sure just as Jeremiah was that God will keep God's promise. We will not be abandoned. There is indeed good news for those of us dreading the holiday season. Amen.

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