

**“Turning Toward Transformation”**  
**A Sermon by Rev. Richard D. Clewell**  
**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**  
**December 10, 2006**  
**Texts: Isaiah 40: 1-11, Mark 1: 1-8**

During a Christmas children’s message the minister asked the children gathered around him what difference it would make if Jesus had never been born. He expected answers like, “We wouldn’t have presents” or “The world would be a worse place.” What he didn’t see coming was the small boy who hesitantly offered, “You would be unemployed.”

Perhaps we need to ponder such a question when life often seems like a wilderness. Even when we manage for a while and seem to be in control, the steamroller of the world system rises up and flattens our expectations. As hard as we try to give life the shape we desire, it often becomes unwanted and overwhelming and we feel that our attempts and efforts to find meaning are useless. The coming of Christmas stands in stark contrast with its beauty and simplicity and brings life’s incongruity into sharper focus.

How shall we approach Christmas this year? Some of us may have already decided upon hearing the first carol somewhere between Halloween and Thanksgiving that it’s pointless to try to keep its message in our hearts. World terrorism, on-going wars, inhuman actions, rampant hunger, poverty, disease and misery among millions seem to drown out the simplicity of God’s announced coming.

On the other hand, you may have already decided to give Christmas another whirl this year. You may look on it as a tinsel counterfeit, loaded with gifts, bright lights, rich food and drink, parties, dancing, a change of routine against the backdrop of the Baby Jesus and plastic crèches. This is the Christmas merry-go-round, a sort of epicurean outlook of “eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die!” And as you reflect after it’s over, you’ll be aware of another Christmas as only a mirage in life’s wilderness. Without God entering our lives, neither the non-Christmas nor the pretend-Christmas are satisfying or transforming. How we see Christmas directly effects our outlook on life. Jean S. Gray, current moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) puts the issue in focus when she states, “Christmas is about the transformation of our world into the world God wants it to be. It is about our transformation into the beloved community. It is about God’s selfless love poured out on a world desperately in need of a savior.”

In our Isaiah text we see in its prophecy the transforming power of God’s gift to those who are open to receive the presence of the Lord in their lives. The people of Israel had gone into exile and suffered for turning away from Jehovah. Yet God continues to care for them and graciously returns them to their land when they had cried out, repented and reestablished their covenant promise. Forgiveness is God’s way of dealing with our rebellion and the Lord comes to deliver the people once again.

Christmas signals God encountering human kind in a new way. In the person of Jesus Christ, we meet our God in the fullness of divine grace and love that gives our life genuine

meaning. A voice crying in the wilderness (v.3) is both the voice of God and our own voice. God's voice reminds us that he is with us always with a love that forgives and transforms. It is our voice too, just as with the people of Israel, who in our desperation, turn to that voice in recognition of our need for divine presence and spiritual satisfaction in our life process.

The coming of God brings comfort and encouragement (v.11) for us to experience transformed lives and new meaning in the midst of this world's wilderness. The coming of Christ at Christmas signals a new way for us to see and know our God through someone who could be touched and talked to directly; one who demonstrated sacrificial love and enables reconciliation and reconnection for we faulty human beings.

There is also the promise in this prophecy of God's ultimate triumph in overcoming the wilderness and destruction of this world system. Despite presence of evidence to the contrary, this God who continues to come to us will ultimately prevail and establish a kingdom of love and light (v.6-11). Mark in his Gospel heralds "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" by using Isaiah's prophecy. It appears that a nativity story was not important or known to Mark but that the announced coming of Jesus following his baptism was his ministry among the people and his sacrificial love that demonstrate life in God's presence to the world. Christ's way becomes the highway for God who touches our lives today.

It is the experience of our heart that we can trust. Henri Nowuen puts it well when he writes, "Our lives are full of suffering, pain, disillusionment, losses and grief, but they are also marked by visions of the coming of the Son of Man. These moments in which we see clearly, hear loudly, and feel deeply that God is with us on our journey make us shine as a light into the darkness. Jesus says, "You are the light of the world. Your light must shine in people's sight, so that seeing your good works; they may give praise to your Father in heaven." (Mtt.5:14-16) The trust of Christmas is not found in the nativity celebrated at Christmas but rather in the ministry, being, and sacrificial love of Christ, the way of the cross – the gift that keeps on giving and forgiving.

John the Baptist wanted people to hear this message: a different life and future was possible, and it was time to get ready to receive it. Those who cannot imagine a different future remain prisoners of the present. The power of transformation begins with repentance. John's job was to declare what needs to be done so that the spirit of Christ can enter our lives and the life of the world. The word, "repentance" in Greek means "to change," "to turn around." Change is not possible if you are self-satisfied with the way you are. With some honest reflection it is possible for self-absorbed people to stop seeing themselves as the center of the universe and to reestablish their lives in God. It is possible to love God and your neighbor. To repent is to turn and look in the direction from which salvation comes, to open oneself and to confess our self-delusion and sin, and receive forgiveness, reconciliation, and the gift of the indwelling Spirit who makes God's kingdom way a reality in our on-going lives. This is what John's words mean, "I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." (v.8) Water symbolizes our repentance and need for cleansing but the gift of the Holy Spirit captures the entire transforming process.

Brian McClaren in his book, *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth that Could Change Everything*, puts it this way, “How would a person make a move from where he or she is to where he or she wants to be, from the old confining kingdom of egotism, racism, consumerism, hedonism, and its other associated “isms” to the expansive kingdom of God (in which we might say, all those “isms” are to become “wasms”)? It becomes clear in Jesus’ life and teachings that immigration into the kingdom involves several interrelated moves.

The first move is to hear from the heart and to think deeply about what you hear. - - Hearing in this deep way means more than listening; it means thinking, and more than thinking. It means rethinking everything in light of the message - - this profound rethinking is what the word “repent” means. It means that you begin looking at every facet of your life again in this new light – from the way you think about God to the way you treat your spouse, from your political affiliation to your spending habits, from what makes you angry to what makes you happy. It doesn’t mean everything changes all at once, but it means you open up to the possibility that everything may change over time. It involves a deep sense that you may be wrong, wrong about so much, along with the sincere desire to realign around what is good and true.”

Once and ever when we repent, the process of believing God, and being receptive to divine forgiveness and grace is the gift of the Spirit. As we experience the process we can begin to live out our faith daily for the rest of our lives.

In this process of transformation, the kingdom of God is alive and growing in this world as Jesus promised. The kingdom of God is not some future entity located somewhere else. Rather, it is a living, growing reality in each Christian who marches to the beat of a different drummer. Rethinking, believing, receiving, going public, and practicing anew way of life – these are the basic elements for renewed and transformed existence which Christ’s coming announced and the way that God’s kingdom continues. Thanks be to God and may the Spirit of God encounter us again and again to assure and enable us to be lights in this world. And so with the saints of all ages, may we cry, “Even so come, Lord Jesus!”

Amen

The Rev. Richard Clewell, D.Min., Pastor