

Wesley United Methodist Church

December 22, 2019

“Comfort...Hope...Joy.”

Isaiah 40:1-11; Romans 8:18-30; Matthew 1:18-25

This service we're sharing this morning has often been named as "Blue Christmas Service". As I spoke with some people about wanting to plan and hold such a service, I realized that all of us at one time or another lost a loved one and dealt with an empty chair at the table during a holiday that is known to us as hope, joy and love, Christmas, the celebration of our Lord and Savior's birth. Therefore I want to share my message with all of you today, not just at an extra service.

When I thought about the term Blue Christmas, I immediately thought of Elvis' rendition of the song by the same name, where he sings "I'll have a blue, blue Christmas without you." In many ways, Elvis brings to light a side of Christmas that is often forgotten. So, this morning, we are acknowledging a fact that is sometimes lost on many people during the celebration of this season...the reality that not everyone's Christmas is a merry one. There are people for whom this time is one of sadness because a sense of loss in their lives becomes magnified. There are feelings of emptiness because of the absence of loved ones who have passed away. There are feelings of pain because of relationships broken, opportunities missed, hopes and dreams shattered, and unsure in what the future holds. There is also sadness felt by those who share and bear the pains of others, and in that shared pain sometimes comes a loss of one's own joy.

With such realities that are lived by many, including many of us here this morning, we might well wonder, what should we make of Christmas? Even in the midst of grief and pain and loss, Christmas still comes. So, some will put on a brave face, soldier on, and try to make Christmas "as normal as possible", yet all the while still screaming inside, "but doesn't anyone know that I am hurting right now?"

It is for and through those who are hurting, though, that the real Christmas comes through. In fact, only a deep reading of the Christmas story would lead anyone to think that Christmas is just only about joy. Christmas is about real life and God coming to us so that He can give us that real life. When we realize this, we receive the comfort we need that brings us the hope that we want and that gives us the joy we want to feel.

Yet one problem with this is that there are some who often wonder: Does God know my pain, does He know what I'm feeling, is He able to appreciate what I'm going through in this life? And Christmas holds the answer to those questions: Yes, He does. In the person of Jesus Christ, the One who came to be Immanuel...God with us...God Himself entered our world and became one with us by being one of us. In Jesus, God knows the hurt and pain of our lives because He shared in it. We have not only a sympathetic God who can say "I can only imagine what you are going through," but a God who knows our pain and grief, who has gone through sufferings, and who knows what we need to heal broken, torn, and wounded lives.

So, the Lord promises us comfort. This comfort is to be found in the great things that our God has promised to do, in what He has done in and through Jesus Christ, and in what He still plans to bring about for his whole creation. Isaiah's promise of God's comfort which we heard in the first reading was first fulfilled when God kept his promise to release His people Israel from their exile. The comfort He was giving to His people was to be found in the forgiveness of their sins and in the assurance that their faithful God would always keep His promises and that His promises will stand forever.

This comfort would be given to all people in and through the coming of Jesus. In the person of the Son of God and Child of Mary, the One who came as God with us, God revealed the full extent of His love for a world that was lost, imperfect, and broken. Through the forgiveness of sins won by Christ's holy and perfect life, His innocent suffering and death, and His glorious resurrection from the dead, God began a work of healing in this world.

And this comfort that God brings to us gives us hope...a hope that we must have in this life that we live day by day. We need hope because we look around us and see and know that things are still less than perfect. Just the very fact that we are here this morning to acknowledge grief, suffering, sorrow and pain makes this point clearly. Yet, why we are also here is to acknowledge that there is hope, that there is a source for this hope, although yet to be fulfilled, it is a true hope because we know that the One who promises us our hope is true.

The apostle Paul in the eighth chapter in his letter to the Romans shares what hope is all about. We are reminded in these words that in Christ, God has already begun to do and to work new life in and for this world. We are also reminded that this world still remains broken, that pain, suffering, and sorrow are still around, and that we have not yet arrived at the fullness of God's plan for the world. But in the midst of all this imperfection, in the midst of hurt and pain, there still remains something important for us to cling to, the most important thing that any of us can receive and possess: the love of God.

It is for us to know that “nothing can separate us from the love of God”, for us to have true and lasting comfort, peace, and above all else, hope. And this hope does not disappoint us, because we know for certain that our God loves us and that He is with us. Even though all seems wrong with the world and our lives, God is still here...loving us, comforting us, and assuring us that He is still working and leading us and our world to that bright future where sorrow and moaning shall be no more and God will be our all in all.

In this hope that we have from our loving God, we can still have joy. Even though we might feel “less than joyful”, in the hope that we have, we can still sing: “Joy to the world, the Lord is come!” Because our Lord Jesus, whose birth we will soon celebrate, has already come and we know that there is hope for us and this world. We know that God is in control of all things and working all things together for the good of those who love Him. We know that there is glory waiting for us and all of creation. And this is all something to be joyful about because God has new life in store for us, not only in the future, but even now as well.

All this is wrapped up as God’s greatest gift, Jesus Christ, the One who lays in a manger, who hangs on the cross, who rises from the grave, and who lives forever at God’s right hand. And this is the One who still remains our Immanuel...God with us. This is the One who has freed us from our sins and given us God’s true and lasting life. This Jesus is the One who remains our comfort, our hope, and our joy. It is on Him that we place the hope of our lives. It is through Him that we receive the peace that this world cannot give, and it is to Him that we give our lives, knowing that He will lead and guide us through this life to the life that is yet to come.

This morning, many of us are wondering if this be a “Blue Christmas” for us. Each of us knows the hurt, the pain, the grief, the suffering that we are going through. What each of us feels is real and no one can deny or convince us that this isn’t so. Yet, even though our blue feelings will be with us and will be a part of our Christmas, what needs to be even greater than our feelings is the sure and certain promise of our God that we receive this morning. God is our comfort who assures us that we are His and that we are loved by Him. God is our hope who is with us to lead, to guide, and to strengthen us through this life. And above all else, God is our joy, who bears with us in our sadness and points us towards that day when all of His promises will be fulfilled and when we will at last share in the joy that belongs to the children of God. But until that day, let us rest secure in the God who is with us and, even in the midst of sadness, receive His tidings of comfort and Joy. Thanks be to Christ! Amen.