

Bringing Our Hurts to the Stable

Third Sunday of Advent – Purple – December 12, 2004
Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages (NRSV)

Isaiah 35:1-2, 5-6

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus² it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.

⁵Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
⁶then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;

Matthew 11:2-11

²When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” ⁴Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. ⁶And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

⁷As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind?

⁸What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. ⁹What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is the one about whom it is written,

‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.’

¹¹Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Today, we continue our Advent series: “What Will You Bring to the Stable?” Tiny Tim brings a life overflowing with joy and love, but a body that is crippled and dying. He reminds us that all our hurts and all our suffering are to be brought to the stable of the Christ-child.

A dark room seems that much darker when we’ve stepped into it from the bright outdoors. Moviemakers will use one spot of color in a black-and-white image to heighten dramatically the contrast. Christmas is a time of much joy and happiness for many of us, but that very joy can serve to deepen the loneliness of those who are alone and the suffering of those who hurt. The pain of divorce, job loss, death, and illness can all be made worse by the Christmas season.

There are two enduring characters in Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*: Scrooge and Tiny Tim. Last week, we observed that in Scrooge we could see the Christian story of transformation, of repentance and rebirth. This is a story that most of us understand. We might not fully appreciate it or make it our own, but we get it. However, Tiny Tim’s story is one about the arrival of God’s kingdom and this story is one that few of us really “get.”

Isaiah and the Kingdom of God

In the Lectionary (the three-year schedule of suggested Scripture readings), each Sunday has a reading from the OT, from a Psalm, from a Gospel, and from a NT epistle. Thus, for the four weeks of Advent there are twelve OT readings over the three years – and seven of them are from Isaiah!! Let’s look at why.

Isaiah consists of two portions. So-called “First Isaiah,” chapters 1-39, was written more than 700 years before Jesus, when the northern kingdom of Israel was overrun and destroyed by the Assyrians. Portions of “First Isaiah” look ahead to a time when all of God’s people would be restored under God’s rule. In other words, the prophet Isaiah looked ahead to the coming of God’s kingdom, when all things would be put right.

So-called “Second Isaiah,” chapters 40-66, was written during the time of the Babylonian exile, about 500 years before Jesus. In the midst of the Jews’ crushing pain and despair, this prophet brought them comforting promises of a time when God would raise up a Savior who would usher in God’s rule. And in God’s kingdom, there would be no blind, no deaf, no lame, no poor – no hurts.

It is an expression of God’s love that the most hopeful images of God’s kingdom were written during Israel’s deepest darkness.

“Yet the least in the kingdom of heaven¹ is greater than he”

“Advent” comes from the Latin for “arrival.” In Advent, we await the arrival of the baby Jesus. But on a deeper level, we await the arrival of God’s Messiah and the world’s Savior. And on a yet deeper level, we await the arrival of God and God’s kingdom.² Of course, actually, we celebrate Jesus’ coming 2,000 years ago while we await his second coming. In the same way, we celebrate the arrival of God’s kingdom nearly 2,000 years ago while we await the coming of its full consummation.³

In A *Christmas Carol*, Tiny Tim is one of the “least.” He is poor, crippled, and will likely die before long. He is trapped in the mire of pain and suffering that plagues so much of our world. Nonetheless, he is anxious to go to church on Christmas so that others will be reminded who it is that made the lame walk. He is filled with joy and is “as good as gold and better” in his father’s eyes and even Scrooge’s. Tiny Tim represents the most tragic and the most hopeful aspects of this world. It is as if Paul is thinking about Tiny Tim when he reminds Christians that we are the ones “upon whom the ends of the ages have met” (1 Corinthians 10:11). Indeed, through Scrooge’s repentance and rebirth, Tiny Tim will be healed. He will be made whole,

“Thy Kingdom Come”

When it comes to comprehending that the kingdom of God is a present, though not yet fulfilled, reality, the Lord’s Prayer can actually work against us if we are not thoughtful. The phrase “Thy kingdom come” might lead us to think that the kingdom is only a future event. How might we come to see it as present also?

When I hear Robert Hasley talk about his experiences with his 3½-year old niece, Callie, I hear kingdom-moments. Robert and Callie enjoy brief snatches of grace-filled time when all is right and good and loving. However brief such experiences might be, it is as if we have stepped into another world, into the kingdom, into the place where the God of love and mercy and rules.

There are more such moments than we think. We just often don’t recognize them for what they are. As Philip Yancey puts it, we miss the “rumors of another world.” Yancey urges us to have stereoscopic vision, able to view both the seen world and the unseen.

for the “lame shall leap like a deer” (Isaiah 35:6) in God’s kingdom. Jesus’ healings were more than acts of compassion, they were enactments of the reality of God’s kingdom. In the kingdom there are no blind, no deaf, no lame, no loneliness, no hurting, no pain, no death. And this kingdom is not a just a future event; it has already been ushered in by Christ, though there is still much work to be done.

Of course, of course we bring our hurts to the stable. Our hurts are expressions of a broken world; the stable is the hope of a renewed world. *But* it is not as if our hurts then magically disappear. We don’t throw the hurts of this world into a bowl with the healing of the kingdom so that we can mix them together, expecting to erase our pains. It is more like we clutch on to the reality of God’s kingdom, so that its healing and hope carry us through the dark days and past our hurts, for there is *nothing* that “can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39).

The birth of Jesus was an event of cosmic significance, turning the world upside-down. In God’s kingdom, the meek shall inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5). In God’s kingdom, the least, such as Tiny Tim, are greater than John the Baptist. This may sound like nothing more than nice sentiment or it might even simply strike you as outlandish – but it is true nonetheless! And the sooner we live out the reality of God’s kingdom in this world, the sooner we will grasp the true meaning of Christmas. “God bless Us, Everyone!”

¹Matthew uses the phrase “kingdom of heaven” rather than “kingdom of God” because of his sensitivity to some Jews’ practice of never using the word “God.” But “kingdom of heaven” in Matthew and “kingdom of God” in Mark, Luke, and John are synonymous. The core of Jesus’ teachings, in word and deed, was his announcement that the “kingdom of God was at hand” (Mark 1:15).

²The challenge is to make this kingdom-talk concrete. Just imagine what it would be like to live in a land in which God is king. Or more concrete still – imagine that you live in a nation ruled by Jesus of Nazareth, the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount. And imagine that the heart of every person in this place has been reshaped into the heart of Jesus. That is what we mean by “the kingdom of God.”

³The June 29, 2003, Sermon Background Study was devoted to this “already/ not yet” understanding of God’s kingdom – with diagrams! You can find it at www.standrewcl.org where all the studies are archived and downloadable. If you are new to this perspective, I hope you will read that study. I think it will help.

Daily Bible Readings

(other readings from the lectionary for the 3rd Sunday of Advent)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 The Good News of deliverance</p>	<p>Day 2 Zephaniah 3:14-20 A song of joy for the salvation of God's people</p>
<p>Day 3 James 5:7-10 Be patient in suffering</p>	<p>Day 4 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 Rejoice always, pray without ceasing</p>
<p>Day 5 John 1:6-8, 19-28 John the Baptist and his testimony</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Coming in January – A New Teaching Series at 9:30 with Scott Engle Biblical Perspectives on Love, Marriage, and Sex

Beginning in January, St. Andrew is going to offer teaching series with Scott Engle at 9:30 on Sunday mornings in Wesley Hall. These teaching series will be keyed to upcoming sermon series.

Our first teaching series will be five weeks long and begin on January 9. We will examine biblical understandings of love, marriage, and human sexuality.

Future teaching series will look at *The Seven Last Words of Christ*, *The Apostles' Creed*, *What Methodists Believe*, and more *Kids' Stories All Grown Up!*

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

When I reread *A Christmas Carol* for this series, I was most struck by the word images that Dickens paints on the last pages. When Scrooge is reborn after the visit of the final Ghost, he sees the world as he never saw it before. It is not like he lost his mind or disconnected from reality; it is more like he donned Yancey's stereoscopic glasses and could see the present reality of God's kingdom. That morning, Scrooge's world became a place filled with generosity and laughter. Scrooge didn't mind that people made fun of him as time went on. He could see the other world, the City of God, even if others were blind to it, and that was enough for him. Tiny Tim's healing is another enactment of God's kingdom. By the grace of God, Scrooge repented, truly, and became the instrument of Tiny Tim's salvation.

How might understanding ourselves as individuals and a community living in two worlds (the City of God and the city of this world) change us ~ our lives, our priorities ~ even our congregation? Are we forced to divided loyalties? Gordon Fee, a leading NT scholar, recently wrote that if he were going to return to be the pastor of a local church (as he once was), he “. . . would set about with a single-minded passion to help a local body of believers recapture the New Testament church's understanding of itself as an eschatological community.” What he means is a community that lives between times, in two worlds. How could such an understanding be so important? Why would he say such thing?

Richard Hays, a UMC ordained pastor and scholar, writes, “. . . the redemptive power of God has already broken into the present time, and the form of this world is passing away.” What do you think our role is to be in the consummation of God's kingdom? Should we quietly await Jesus' return and watch the present world “pass away?” Or are we to do all we can to renew creation and make God's kingdom a present reality? If renewal is our responsibility, what can we actually do? What did Scrooge do?