

Rev. Dr. David Holyan  
“The Good News”  
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood  
Sunday, December 15, 2019

**Isaiah 35:1-10**

*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,  
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;  
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,  
and rejoice with joy and singing.  
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,  
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.  
They shall see the glory of the Lord,  
the majesty of our God.*

*Strengthen the weak hands,  
and make firm the feeble knees.  
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,  
‘Be strong, do not fear!  
Here is your God.  
He will come with vengeance,  
with terrible recompense.  
He will come and save you.’*

*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;  
then 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;  
the burning sand shall become a pool,  
and the thirsty ground springs of water;  
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,  
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.*

*A highway shall be there,  
and it shall be called the Holy Way;  
the unclean shall not travel on it,  
but it shall be for God’s people;  
no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.  
No lion shall be there,  
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;  
they shall not be found there,  
but the redeemed shall walk there.  
And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,  
and come to Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;  
they shall obtain joy and gladness,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*

## Matthew 11:2-11

*When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the 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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'*

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

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

*Truly 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.*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words that each of us carry within, the words offered in song and in prayer, read from Scripture and those that you've laid upon my heart this morning. Touch, bless and transform all of these into the living word of Jesus Christ. And let that word speak its joy, peace, love. Let it speak whatever our hearts and our souls and our minds need this day. May you somehow, by the power and mystery of your spirit, fashion a word for each of us, your Word, Christ's word. And let that word do its work in us, with us, and through us, out into this world. I ask this in the faithful Name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

So I spent a good part of the last week and last weekend on retreat at Ghost Ranch, the Presbyterian camp in northwest New Mexico. And I went out there with a pile of books and time just to get away and reflect on what it is God is doing in this season of Advent and at this time of preparing for Christmas. When I checked in, I thought, "This was going to be nice. It's going to be quiet. I'll have time just to sit, to pray, to journal, and to read. And I'll have my day spaced out in a beautiful rhythm by treks to the dining hall for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. In a sense, it breaks the day up beautifully. I have my morning prayer time, go to breakfast, have a later morning time, go to lunch, take a nap, do a little bit of reading, go to dinner. And then after dinner, time to read and to sit and to look at the stars. But when I checked in, the woman said, "Oh, I'm sure that they told you when you made your reservation that the dining hall is closed." And I said, "Well, I made my reservations about four months ago and no, no one told me then." She said, "Well, don't worry. We've got sandwiches available in a little cooler back here and some fruit." And I thought, "Oh, joy, a whole week, no food, except for a sandwich with a little bit of-- yeah, okay."

So I got in the car and I drove up to where I was staying on top of a mesa, looked around and realized there was no one else up there. The place was quiet as crickets. I mean, there was nothing but stars and beauty. And then later, the next day when I drove down on my way to the little store that's about 10 minutes down the road, trying to think, "Okay, what am I going to do for food?" It dawned on me that there were no other cars in the whole place. I think I may have been the only person other than employees at Ghost Ranch at that time. Everyone else had gotten the message. So I go to the store. Thankfully, they have a little kitchen that makes sandwiches. I think they do breakfast, but they definitely do lunch. So I got lunch and figured out dinner. And away I go. During the time that I was there, as my stomach was making some strange noises, I kept thinking about the prayers that I have asked over the last several years, and one prayer in particular, Lord, take the pain away. I've said this prayer so many times that I've lost count every time I feel a twinge or a tweak or a cramp, every time my back feels funny, every time that I would have surgery or be in the hospital or just throughout the day, Lord, take the pain away." And I prayed this prayer almost ceaselessly. In fact, I continue to pray it, "Take the pain away." I'm thankful for the interventions that have been done in my spine that have made the pain less, but it's still there. Lord, take the pain away.

And I remember the time when I was in seminary, and I'd heard from a few friends that there was a new fellowship that had formed in downtown Princeton, a group of students and others who were Pentecostal had gotten together, formed a little house church that met in a-- I don't even remember what it was. It was a dark space with chairs. And I sat there for week after week after week on Sunday nights, praying that God would give me the spirit of tongues. For some reason, I was convinced that if God's Spirit would touch me, I could speak in tongues, I would be a good Christian. Everything would be okay. And I kept praying and praying and praying. And to this day, I cannot speak in tongues. I learned Hebrew and Greek in seminary, which is the closest that I've gotten, but no tongues, no healing, no tongues. The pain is still here. And I talk, for the most part, in ways that makes sense to others.

And it got me thinking as I sort of did the progression of all the prayers that you ask, all the prayers that we as a church ask, all of the prayers that I have asked, and Karen and others on your behalf, and all of those that have remained unanswered. And into the readings that I was doing. Thankfully, one of the authors suggested that we in the West always seem to expect a God that answers our prayers from on high. That in a sense, when we talk about God in any way, we're usually referring to a God who is up there, listening, watching, protecting, guiding, in control, in charge, but always up there, a powerful Mighty God, who, like many of the people of Israel, would come and one day restore right order in this world, a God who would show up mighty and power and force, wipe out the enemies of Israel, restore the temple, the kingdom, holiness, justice, peace, mercy, but do so from on high. And I kept holding that and wondering, "Why hasn't God answered our prayers? Why hasn't God answered my prayers? When will God act?"

And again, I don't know how these books end up in my sort of pile that I end up reading. But another of the books talked about an Eastern perspective, an Eastern Orthodox perspective of God. And there's a theologian named John Haught, H-A-U-G-H-T, who's written books about this Eastern understanding of God and he's also an evolutionary scientist. And he's piecing together how God and evolution, creation and evolution can be tied together. And he said, "Rather than having a god that's on high and above, the Eastern Church looks at a God who is below, within, and in front of us." And then his next line was something along the lines of, "They do not believe in a God of coercion, but a God of persuasion. A God who is below us, within us and out in front of us." In a sense, the presence of the Spirit working in our lives, not from above, like a puppet master, dictating how everything will work out, but a God who is intimately with us in the midst of all of our struggles and all of our pains. A God who is calling us, persuading us to continue to trust and to move forward in the ways of peace, love, mercy, and justice. And it dawned on me as I thought about all of that and prayer and thinking about coming back and preaching on this Sunday from the text and the Gospel of Matthew. I am not the only one who's ever asked the question, "Are you the one or should I expect another?"

John, the cousin of Jesus. John, who heard from the moment he was aware of words, about his father's experience in the temple, when the angel of the Lord came to him and said, "You and your wife, even though you're old, you're going to have a son. You will name him John. He will be the one that goes before the Messiah to prepare the way. I know you don't believe me, so you don't get to say anything until it happens, until he's born." That John, who knew that his cousin was the one from God, who had heard that story again and again and again, who baptized Jesus in the Jordan and heard all about what Jesus is doing asks, "Are you the one or should we wait for another?" If John asked that, then we are in good company when we ask it. And the reason that John asked is because John wanted someone who would come down from on high and set the world right. John wanted someone who would come down and vanquish the Babylonians and restore the temple, where his dad was in the Holy of Holies when the angel visited. John wanted someone who would come down and make the people of Israel, the family of God with power and might and strength. And he was so disappointed that he asked his cousin, "Are you the one or should we expect another?"

And then I thought about Christmas. I thought about the fact that we expect a child to be born in a manger at night. Not in the end, but out in the stable. A child, innocent, unprotected. A child. Why on earth would we pray for a God from on high when a child is born to us, a child who is the fullness of God, but who, as it says in Philippians, emptied himself and came down and was one of us. In a sense, a God not above, but below, a God within. And now as the risen Lord in front of us, pointing us, calling us to a new way of life. And as I thought about that God, the persuasive God who's below, with us, who's within us, and who's before us, I thought, "You know what? I can pray to that God. When I think about your grandchildren who are going through chemotherapy, I can pray to Jesus to be with that person with you. When I think about you going through chemotherapy yourself, I can pray to that God who is below you, supporting you, within you, struggling, and who was before you, promising something better. And I can pray to a God who was with me in my suffering. On the good days when I feel no pain, on most days when I feel some, and on the worst days when I continue to question, I can pray to a God who is with us, who is below, and who is in front.

So the reason I asked the children what they want for Christmas is because I want to ask you, what do you want? Do you want a holy and mighty and powerful God who knows everything and commands it to be as He wills from on high? Or do you want an innocent child and a loving spirit that is within us giving us life and calling us to a better way? All of this makes me realize that we need to be careful what we expect when it comes to God. And it should say something to all of us that God chose to come as a child. Not as a warrior, not as a king, in the sense of power, not in any of the ways that anyone expected. God showed up as a child. And so I ran across this story in the paper, that talks or invites us to consider how we pray and expect God to show up. And how often we'll miss God's presence when we expect something from on high, something mighty and something powerful.

*NOTE: The sermon was not quite finished due to a medical emergency in the congregation*