

“Good News of Great Joy?”
Isaiah 9:1-3, Isaiah 12:1-6,
Matthew 3:1-6; Luke 2:8-12

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Good news of great joy! When I look at the news around us these days, “good news” seems like an oxymoron. I guess I’m struggling to get into Christmas, partly because I keep hearing about the world around us. We hear of wars and rumors of wars, or we hear of terrorism, or we hear of ecological disaster and climate change, or we recognize that human welfare around the world is struggling. We hear there’s still slavery out there. We hear there are still people without enough food. And if it weren’t enough to think about the global situation, we have our own struggles as a nation—our own violence, the mass shootings, the racial segregation, the struggle between the races we are confronting again, the divisiveness of our social and political views. So as a nation, we struggle as well.

Then, what about our own lives? When I think about what’s going on for me, too often I resonate with Paul’s saying, “I do not do what I want to do.” I think he says something like, “If I do not do what I want to do, then the sin remains in me.” It’s all too clear. I am reminded of his final warning at the end of Galatians 5:26, where he says, “Don’t be conceited, and don’t provoke one another to anger, and don’t be envious and jealous of one another.” There’s a longer list earlier in the passage, and some of those are easier to put aside, but that last list is often way too easy to see in my own life. Maybe you can say that none of those are happening in your life, but it’s not that way for me. So I struggle even internally with how to live in this world and how I make the right responses. It’s too easy to let those things come to the fore.

Then, what group do we embed ourselves in? Where do we find truth? How do we decide who to listen to? How can we be sure that it’s not just being slanted in some way to get us to think in a particular way? Where do we find that group that really is doing the Lord’s will? Where do we look to join in with others who are doing what’s right? And in the midst of it, how do I deal with my impulses to react with anger or to deal with fear in unhelpful ways?

I hate to go through a litany of things that are not so good, but I can’t help but look around and see them and recognize that we as people have some real struggles that we’re dealing with. What do we do about them? Where do we turn? One place we can turn is to listen to John the Baptist or the prophets. Earlier we read Zechariah’s prophecy of what would happen to his son, John, and the one his son would announce. So perhaps we can begin by turning there and hearing what John says. Basically, he says the same thing, turn. He says repent, turn around, turn to the Lord. It’s so easy to think that I can be in charge, that I can make things happen, or that humankind is the one that can solve the world’s problems.

I am reminded of that story I told last week of the destroyer ship Captain who told the light to move out of his way, and the light came back and said, “I’m a lighthouse.” There are those lights, those places, that no matter how much we think we can go there, there are limits. We have to change course. It’s hard, I think, to recognize our

own limits, to not think that somehow we're going to solve it all. And yet, we need that light. That's why I think it's so incredibly wonderful that we have a God who recognizes we need the light that would show us the way, who sees our struggle and comes among us.

As I think about the Christmas story, it's always incredible to me that what we're looking forward to is a baby lying in a manger. There are no light sabers, there's no Millennium Falcon, no Death Star. God comes as a baby. Maybe it suggests something to us—that the answer we're looking for is not in a final battle that will make things good again and everything will be resolved. Perhaps the answer is in a life lived. We know what Christ did. We celebrate his birth, we celebrate his life, we celebrate his death, and we celebrate his resurrection. It seems that there is a pathway that God takes us through. Inviting us to follow Christ means to live a life in following, listening to, and turning to God and it is through following that we—I love the way Isaiah says it—that we can draw water from the wells of salvation. It's remembering that we need a savior.

I think we struggle a little with saviors these days because so many of the people we've tried to look up to have fallen in some way or other. But we know we can't do it on our own. We need a savior, and God has given us one, one to follow, a life to live. It is incredible that God comes to be among us. I want to tell a story that I heard at a session meeting devotion the other night, because it reminds us of what God is doing.

It was Christmas Eve, and this fellow sent his family off to church without him, because he couldn't quite see a God who would come to earth. It didn't really make sense to him. So he sent his family off, sat down, turned on the light, opened up the newspaper, and started to read. Then these birds came and started hitting his window. He went out and tried to shoo the birds away. It was a cold and windy night and they just seemed to want to come in and get warm.

He thought, "Well maybe the light is attracting them." So he went out to the barn, and turned on the light there, and left the door open. He thought maybe they would go down there now. So he shooed them away again to see if they would head for the barn instead of banging into the window. They were gone for a little bit, but they came right back and started banging into the window again. He thought, "They just don't get it. What can I do? If only I could become a bird and show them what to do!" In that instant, he understood the Christmas story—God came to be one of us.

It reminds us of what God is doing. It often feels a little like we're flying into a window and we need to change what we're doing. God comes to show us the way as one of us, to be among us. How incredible it is that we have a God that cares enough, that sees what's going on with us, that comes into our midst and would show us the way and be our savior.

Now it feels to me that the world today isn't really paying much attention to that, but I still believe that's what it's all about and that we need this savior to show us the way, to remove our sin, to guide us into life and to life everlasting. And that's why I will rejoice this Christmas. We have a savior who is Christ the Lord. Hallelujah! Amen.