

Isaiah 9:2-7
Isaiah 40:1-11
Matthew 11:28-30
John 1:1-5, 14

Sermon December 20th Blue Christmas

God's Light Shines in Our Darkness

This time of year is a very difficult time for those of us who are struggling with a mental health concern, or the grief of a loved one, or loneliness, or illness, or some past wound that has been triggered by the holiday season, or unemployment, or any suffering for that matter.

For one, the darkness is overwhelmingly present as we get closer to the winter solstice. The air is frigid keeping us indoors more. Our bodies ache from all the shovelling as the snow falls.

Then there are all the people around us that are reflecting the joy that comes with the Christmas season. People excited to get together over the holidays to reconnect. Children looking forward to Santa coming with lots of presents. People who work in the stores are smiling and wishing us a happy holiday season. Most of the songs we hear on the radio are celebrating the coming of Christmas or how wonderful it is to see the snow fall. The majority of Christmas classics we see on the television have some warm family togetherness theme.

We are surrounded by people and mediums that unintentionally remind us of our own pain. Whether it is feeling lonelier after watching a Christmas classic. Or people avoiding you, because no one wants a downer around to spoil their Christmas Spirit. Leaving you feeling ignored and rejected. Enhancing your mental health concern. Or the commercialism painfully reminds you of the fact you can't afford to give presents to those you love this year. Or Bing Crosby's "I'll be Home for Christmas" magnifies the fact that this may be your last Christmas with the one you love. Or the first Christmas without the one you love.

It is hard to be suffering at this time of year. Most of the time we try to repress it. Put a smile on our faces. And just get through the Christmas season.

The Israelites struggled in both Assyrian and Babylonian exile for a long period of time. Isaiah sees the pain they have endured and offers them words of comfort. Not denying their pain, but acknowledging the suffering they have endured. Knowing that they need someone to walk with them in this darkness.

Isaiah also gives them a message of hope, reassuring the people that even in the midst of their darkness, God's light is shining.

We hear Isaiah's message this evening hoping to feel that comfort. Hoping to see that light. Whether it is someone who sees we are hurting and instead of expecting us to suck it up, is compassionate and walks with us as we suffer this season. Or a church community who lifts us up with a hamper so we can provide for our family over the Christmas season. Or a community of friends and family who come together to be with us during this last Christmas with our spouse or this first Christmas without our spouse. Sitting with us. Praying with us. Listening to us. Weeping with us. Or we are pointed to a story in our holy scriptures that reflects God's healing and redeeming love for us. Or we feel God speak to us in a sermon or hymn during worship.

Isaiah reassures us that God does not abandon us in our darkness. God comforts us and shows us God's light.

John's gospel takes this image and connects it to Jesus. The baby in the manger becomes for us our experience of God in the world. Our light in the midst of the darkness. In Bethlehem the baby Jesus gave hope to an oppressed people that maybe their oppression wouldn't be forever. In the early church, Jesus' ministry gave people hope their suffering wouldn't be forever. For us, the Holy Spirit gives us hope that even though we suffer now, the promise we receive in that stable, through Jesus' ministry, on that cross, in the empty tomb, and on the day of Pentecost is we will experience God's healing and redemption.

For today, as we wait to experience this redemption we remember Jesus' words in Matthew 11. Jesus' words that reassure us of God's presence as we wait. Come to me and I will give you rest. I will comfort you.

Jesus says this to his disciples who get discouraged from time to time as they face persecution. As they fall short of what Jesus invites them to be.

Matthew shares these words with his community, because they continue to face suffering for believing, and he wants to reassure all of us who suffer that Jesus doesn't abandon us. God doesn't abandon us. We will be given rest. We will be comforted. God will walk with us through our suffering into new life. This is the good news of the gospel as we struggle through this Advent and Christmas season.

Let us pray, gracious God, sometimes life is barely bearable. Sometimes, our pain is just too much. You have given us Christmas to give us hope. To celebrate Jesus' birth. This year we are struggling to do this. Please walk with us holding us close. Comforting us. Catching our tears as they fall. Helping us see your light in the midst of our darkness. We give thanks that you invite people into our lives who love us and walk with us as we suffer. Open our hearts to feel the hope that your Son breathes into our lives.
Amen.

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