

“The Message of Hope”

Polo First United Methodist Church
Polo, IL

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

John 1:3b-5

December 11, 2011 (3rd Sunday of Advent)

Prayer: Savior Christ, calm us now into a quietness that heals and listens. Open wounded hearts to the balm of your Word. Speak to us in clear tones so that we might feel our spirits leap for joy and skip with hope as we watch and wait for you. Amen.

Raise your hand if you’ve heard this one before. The oppressed will hear the good news. The brokenhearted will be healed. The captives will be liberated. The prisoners will be set free.

Sounds familiar, doesn’t it? The promise that everything is going to be different. The assurance that things are going to change around here. That in a big way, this world, our lives, are going to be transformed, and that everything is going to be perfect.

We’ve only heard it about a million times. Haven’t we? We hear it every year at Christmas time, if not the rest of the year as well. The promise that God will break into the ordinary, bringing peace, joy, and a restored life. That Christ will come and we’ll all be forgiven and made whole.

It’s such an idyllic picture it should be on a Hallmark card, or have a movie written about it. One of those feel good films where you go home uplifted and fall asleep with a smile on your face and wake up the next morning with a fuzzy feeling still.

Because that’s what this time of the year is all about, right? The George Bailey’s of the world getting saved by their guardian angels. The Ebenezer Scrooge’s seeing the error of their ways and turning their lives around in time to bring the Christmas turkey to Tiny Tim. And the Ralphie Parker’s getting their long sought after Red Ryder BB Gun with the compass in the stock.

Meanwhile, here we are plugging away. Where is our guardian angel? Where is our Ghost of Christmas Future? Where is our Red Ryder BB Gun? Huh? Where are they? That’s not even bringing up all that stuff about comfort for the hurting, release for those in chains, good news of great joy for the poor. That would be just too much to ask!

Where is this Savior that was promised to be coming? Where is this peace we’ve heard so much about? Where is this new life we’ve been hoping for? Am I the only one that doesn’t see it? We hear about it every year, but where is it?

Maybe that's what makes this time of the year so difficult. Because after how many times we've heard it, the promise still hasn't become a reality. We wait in eager longing for our hope to become real, for this broken world to be remade, for our sinful lives to be transformed. But it doesn't come.

So we put on a smile. Sing the Christmas carols. We decorate our houses with lights and ornaments and nativity sets thinking that if we surround ourselves with the symbols of the season that maybe everything will turn out right. We bake the Christmas cookies and build the gingerbread houses hoping against hope that all that sugar might take some of the edge off. We shop and shop and shop, searching for the perfect gifts for those we love, and we err on the side of getting them one more thing, knowing full well it probably won't take away that twinge of disappointment that seems to come after all the wrapping paper is crumbled up in the garbage.

I don't know . . . maybe I'm cynical, but it seems to me that we're in the dark here (**ALTAR LIGHTS OFF**). We try so hard to ignore it, but it's still all around us (**SANCTUARY LIGHTS OFF**). And this darkness makes it so hard to see anything else. So we surround ourselves with the lights and the presents and the food (**SOFFIT LIGHTS OFF**). But we're still in the dark.

It's in the darkness that all the rest of our senses are put on high alert. Is it just my imagination or can we smell better when it's dark. We're more sensitive to the air around us, even the faintest breeze can be felt. And our hearing perks up. We listen attentively for something, anything.

And then out of the darkness we hear it. We can't see it yet but we can hear it. It starts out softly at first, but we turn our ears in the direction its coming from and are able to hear it clear as a bell. It's good news. Comfort. Grace. Healing. Forgiveness. Joy.

Excited we begin to run off in the direction the sound is coming from but as we run we realize we've lost track of the Word. So we stop and listen. After a while the sound comes back to us. Is it fainter than before? We walk the other direction sure that this is the right way to the source. But after several steps we're no closer to finding it than before. So we stop, sit down, and decide to just listen. Simply hearing it is better than nothing.

There's no sense in trying to find it ourselves, so we'll just wait and watch. Maybe the one speaking will show them-self eventually.

Then, out of the corner of our eye we see something. It's a faint light. It may be small but in this darkness it's all we can see. Our eyes are drawn to it. We can't look away. What is it? Where is it coming from? What does it mean?

And with the light came a voice and it said, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it."

That's it! The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. It's hope! It may be just a glimpse but it's enough. Those faint words with that faint light they're enough for right now. We're transfixed, our eyes and ears are locked in. We're afraid if we look away they'll be gone as quickly as they came.

We need this light, we need this Word in the midst of this darkness. Because we're oppressed, we're brokenhearted, we're mourning, we're held captive to something, we're imprisoned in some way. We've gone too long, suffered too much, grieved enough. We've ignored the darkness that's surrounding us for one day too long.

But this light and this Word, they give us confidence. Confidence in the promise we have heard. Confidence in the message of Good News. Confidence in the message of healing, of freedom, of forgiveness. Confidence in the message of grace, of comfort, of joy. This is the message of Hope. It may be faint, but can you hear it? Can you see it?

You're probably not going to hear it if you've always got the Christmas carols blaring from your car stereo. Or if you're bustling around in the mall, fighting the crowds. You're probably not going to see it unless you take your eyes off the store catalogs and the recipes for a moment to just sit and watch, just sit and be. If you're surrounded by all these other lights of the Christmas tree and the televisions and computer screens you probably won't notice the faint light off in the distance.

But it's there. The Word and the Light. They are Hope. Hope just not for the future, but for the right now. For the grief you have. For the pain you're feeling. For the happiness you're missing. The Word and the Light are Hope. A sure promise that life can be different, transformed, now and most certainly in the future.

You can't go looking for it, though. It's something that has to come to you. You have to sit down and listen intently. You have to shut off all those other lights in order to see the true Light that overcomes the darkness. Can you hear it? Can you see it?

Amen.