

December 16, 2007  
The Third Sunday in Advent

“It’s a Wonderful Life”

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 have an anxious heart, "Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you."*

*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; in the haunt of jackals, where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.*

*And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Way of Holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it. It shall belong to those who walk on the way; even if they are fools, they shall not 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 gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*

James 5:7-11

*Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.*

Matthew 11:2-15

*Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."*

*As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written,*

*"Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you. Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.*

### Sermon

Do you remember the end of the movie, "It's a Wonderful Life?" George Bailey is looking around at his family and is the picture of happiness. He has been given this angelic vision of what the world would be like without him, and he realizes that he really did make a difference and that he really is blessed. You are left with the feeling that from here on out, George Bailey is going to be one happy and contented man because, well, it really is a wonderful life. And for George everything can stop there because it's a movie.

But what if it wasn't? If George were real, how long do you think he could maintain that blissful happiness of it being a wonderful life? I'm thinking not too long. Stuff is going to happen that makes him question if life really is wonderful. I'm thinking that even under the best of circumstances, George isn't going to be able to keep the "everything's wonderful" attitude once little Janie and Zuzu Bailey get old enough to date. Maybe little Peter Bailey grows up and ships out with the army to Korea, and then the family gets a telegram that he won't be coming back. George's wife Mary comes back from the doctor and says, "It's cancer." The fact is that life doesn't stay happy and perfect and wonderful.

You have to wonder if something along these lines happened with John the Baptist. You have to bet that John was ecstatic about the arrival of Jesus on the scene for John's main purpose was to herald Christ's ministry. In the fourth Gospel we hear the Baptist speak about how he knows his ministry must become less as Christ's becomes greater. I'm pretty sure John was excitedly anticipating what Jesus was about to do.

But then life happened, and not the wonderful kind. John is arrested and thrown into King Herod's prison. The judgment that John had been proclaiming doesn't seem to come to pass in Christ. John doubts. He sends messengers to ask if Jesus really is the messiah, or if there is yet someone else to come.

This is Christ's reply, *"Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."*

If you were paying close attention earlier during the readings, you may have picked up on that these words of Jesus are hearkening back to the words of Isaiah in our Old Testament lesson. The prophet Isaiah hundreds of years before Christ paints a beautiful picture of how almighty God will make all things perfect. We often look at Jesus' miracles and think, "Isn't that wonderful. He's doing all these nice things and making the sick and lame and blind people happy." Jesus here points out that He is about a whole lot more than making a few lives a little happier and more wonderful. Jesus is about restoring God's creation to the perfection it was meant to be! Each healing or

casting out of a demon Jesus does is a little bit of a restoration, a correcting of what went so horribly wrong with creation back in the Garden of Eden.

When John gets this message back in prison, and he ties it in with our reading from Isaiah 35, you've got to think that John also had to think about Isaiah chapter 61 where the prophet says, "*The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners...*" John may have had hope of release from Herod's prison, but we know eventually John was beheaded there. I can't say what John thought as he headed to the executioner. As John was such a great prophet I'm quite sure he had a powerful faith in Yahweh's plan, but I can't help wondering if there was some confusion in his mind as he headed to the block, the he wondered "What happened to this wonderful life you were supposed to be bringing, Jesus?"

Jesus did come to bring us a wonderful life, but first he came to join with us in our fallen life. Jesus, true God, humbled Himself to become true man, to join with us in our human life, to be one of us walking amid the ruin that has become of God's perfect creation. That's what we celebrate at Christmas; not just God coming to earth, but God coming to earth as a man that mankind might be joined to Him. But unlike we who are one with the brokenness of our world, Jesus was a man who retained the perfectness of God, the purity with which God meant us to live. And then, as a man totally unblemished by sin, Jesus took our sins upon himself on the cross. He endured the most terrible of deaths, bearing the wrath of both man and God almighty, so that we might have the most wonderful of lives. You see, what Jesus did was pay a price, that we might be recreated, reborn into a wonderful life.

Isaiah writes all about it. He writes of this wonderful life where the wilderness and desert will burst forth with new life. He talks of how all the things wrong with people—sickness, lameness, blindness—all will become well again. He talks of how things will be holy, and the dangers we have around us today will be gone. And then Isaiah tells us who this land is for; "*...the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the lord shall return and come to Zion with singing.*"

Christ's sacrifice, His paying the blood-price demanded by sin, has bought us this wonderful life. He has taken we broken, evil, corrupt people and made us pure, able to walk in this wonderful new creation. Although we were steeped in sin, we are no longer so. Isaiah writes "*And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Way of Holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it. It shall be for those who walk in the Way.*" Without Christ, we would never qualify. But because Christ was a human being, we human beings have joined with Him to become something we never were before: holy.

And yet, we're kind of like John the Baptist. We know Messiah has arrived. We even know more than John did because we know of Christ's saving death and resurrection and we know of His coming second advent. But we see the violence and hatefulness in the world around us, and we see the frailty of our bodies as they get injured or age and begin to fail us. We can feel kind of like John headed toward the executioner's block. We can feel the time ticking away toward the end of this life we know, and we may start asking, "Where is the wonderful life. Where is this new creation?"

It's here...and it's not. It is that sometimes-infuriating "now and not yet." It's not here yet, because we still face temptation, hardship and violence. We still sin. We still

struggle and Satan still accuses us daily and tries to throw us into despair over our failures. He tries to convince us that we are the same old man or woman, still steeped in sin, that nothing has changed, that nothing has been recreated.

But it is now because Christ has made us holy in God's sight. Christ's work was effective and it has made us new. We see this recreation unto holiness in the water and the Word of Holy Baptism and sins are washed away. We taste this recreation in the Lord's Supper as we receive the very body and blood of Jesus Christ for the removal of sin. We hear the recreation every time I announce the forgiveness of sins in worship or even when we as Christians simply forgive one another. We are made new now, and it links us with that coming Second Advent of Christ when we will be judged "not guilty" and the wonderful eternal life with Christ will commence.

We don't like waiting. But God gave us these recreative gifts of Baptism, the Lord's Supper and absolution to sustain us through this wait. Through the faith that grasps these gifts, we are the new, holy people who tread the highway called "The Way of Holiness." Stay on the Way, and wait on the Lord.

*"Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand."*

Be patient and trust in Christ, for He has already purchased this gift for you with His blood. The gift; it's a wonderful life. It's forever and it's for you.