

December 13, 2009
Third Sunday in Advent
Luke 7:18-28

Focus Statement: The faithful are restored in the end.

Function Statement: The hearers bear harsh times in faith and hope.

It is well documented by various studies and anecdotal evidence that the number of people suffering and the severity of depression increase this time of year. I'm sure there are a number of contributing factors. All the added demands of holiday shopping and activities mean more stress and less sleep. Finances are usually a source of concern and this time of year a lot of folk start hemorrhaging cash, often beyond what they can really afford. It's also the end of another year and a lot of people wonder where the time went as they look back on dreams, plans and resolutions that never materialized as they hoped.

But the depressing thing I want to focus on today is the way we are inundated with images of the perfect Christmas. All the advertising bombards us with messages telling us should be able to choose the perfect gifts, cook the perfect meal, decorate the perfect tree and have perfect peace and harmony in our families. Then you get all the Christmas movies and TV shows wherein everything turns out wonderful in the end. A broken family comes back together. Little Timmy can walk! Lassie comes home! It's Christmas and everything is wonderful!

Who wouldn't get depressed? I mean, compared to these Hallmark Hall of Fame Christmas stories many of our real-life Christmases are a train wreck with a bow on top. Even the best Christmases are never perfect. The kids are nasty to each other and fight over who gets to do Playstation. There are problems about which in-laws get visited when. All those maddening things that our families and coworkers and teachers and friends do the rest of the year don't disappear by some Christmas magic.

Broken homes are still broken. Drugs and alcohol are still abused. Grudges are still held. Spouses are still abused and cheated on. Teenagers are still rebellious. Parents still just don't get it. Cancer, Alzheimers or whatever the affliction still hurts and kills. Sin and injustice still happen. The media likes to paint a picture of the season that says the celebration of the arrival of the Messiah in the world will make everything better. Just believe in Christmas and everything will be made rosy. But it's not true. The world is still fallen and life is still broken. We can be depressed; left asking ourselves "Where is my Christmas magic?"

John the Baptizer might have felt this same way. He kind of was the media about the arrival of Jesus Christ. He proclaimed Jesus with, "*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*" He proclaimed Jesus as Messiah. He proclaimed that Jesus was the Lord who would "*gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.*" It seems John was expecting a whole lot from Jesus.

But he finds himself imprisoned by King Herod. He sends messengers to find Jesus and ask if He really is the Messiah. They find Jesus preaching and doing wonderful miracles for many people. They ask, "*Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?*"

Imagine being John, sitting in prison, having dedicated his entire life to Yahweh as a Nazarene, a Jewish monk of sorts, a man whose coming was prophesied by Isaiah. And you get this answer from your Messiah. "*The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them.*" Jesus is calling to mind the prophet Isaiah's wonderful description of the coming of the Lord. Jesus is saying that yes, He is the Messiah and John should expect no other. But John is in prison, and I've got to think that when he heard all this that on some level he was thinking, "What about me? Where is my blessing?" almost asking, "Where is my Christmas magic?"

But Jesus final words to John are this, “*And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.*” More literally, “Blessed is the one who is not scandalized by me.”

Jesus Christ is not the kind of Messiah we want, is He? If we could build our Messiah there would be no cross. Our Messiah would be a Hallmark Hall of Fame Jesus who comes down and makes our lives easy, care free and happy. Our Messiah would get rid of all the “bad people” in our lives and make things rosy. He wouldn’t so much get rid of our sin as He would makes things great despite our sin.

I’m sure John was hoping for a Messiah that would at least get His herald out of Herod’s prison. But that’s not the kind of Messiah Jesus is. John the Baptizer would die in that prison for doing nothing more than proclaiming God’s Word. And Jesus was calling on John to have faith despite all that.

You see, Jesus did not come to make everything peachy and wonderful and perfect in this life. He came to live the same life we do, our broken life in a broken world, except to do it perfectly—unbroken so to speak. Then perfect in all ways, Jesus was able to take all of our brokenness and sin upon Himself and die the death to sin that we deserve for us. He then rose from death in victory to a new, perfect and everlasting life and it is that life into which we are baptized and one day will share with Christ when all things are brought to completion.

But therein lies the offense, the scandal. We don’t want to wait. Isaiah’s beautiful vision of the redemption our Lord comes to pass, but in a way we do not expect. It comes to pass with our Lord bloodied and beaten and hanging on a cross. The advent of our King comes in a crucifixion. We want the King in glory and perfection that makes this life good and we want Him now. And therein lies the difference.

Those who demand and trust in the blessings of this life must reject a king who comes as a suffering servant. Such a God doesn't make sense. Such a God doesn't bring comfort. Such a God is offensive and scandalous. And when this life inevitably falls apart into pain and/or death as it always does, they still reject this God.

But the truly blessed are those who trust in the way God has chosen to work. The truly blessed humble themselves before the Lord and accept that He has given us not what we sinners want, but what we sinners truly need. We know that Messiah has taken away our sins. He hasn't made this broken life perfect, but He has made us perfect so that when we stand in judgment on the other side of our resurrection, we need not fear that unquenchable fire.

I guess it is kind of depressing that we still have to go through all the trials of this life. I imagine John the Baptizer struggled with his being imprisoned while Messiah ministered only miles away. But Jesus called on John to be faithful unto death no matter how bad things seemed and promised that the one who does so will be truly and eternally blessed beyond measure. He makes the same promise to us. And He has not abandoned us until that last day, but has made ample provision to be among us.

He has given us the Holy Spirit so we truly blessed can accept this Messiah, our Messiah, in the many ways He comes to us. In His Word, in Holy Baptism, in the bread and wine, in all these things that make up His body the church. These things are not "Christmas magic." They are Jesus Christ Himself coming to us and dwelling in us.

Let this lift any holiday depression off of your shoulders. In all the brokenness of the Christmas season remember that there is a perfection where everything turns out in the end. You are living it in Christ. Your sins have been taken away by the scandal of the cross so you are perfect. When the end of the story comes to pass in God's appointed time, you will be perfect.

No matter what the present looks like, you will have the wonderful everlasting life. You are and will be blessed in Christ.