

***Impossible Promises of Utopia***

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*Preached at Lower Merion Baptist Church*

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Isaiah 35:1-10

*“...everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”*

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent

*Movement 1 – Exile (life is hard)*

What would life be like without Christ? How would we live? How would we be?  
What would life be like without Christ?

It would be similar to asking what life would be like without hope. What would life be like without any profound hope, without any profound promise of something greater than you or I. What would life be like without hope?

Think of the Jews in Babylon. The Babylonian exile of Israel and Judah is one of the more significant events in the Bible that has shaped and affected many of the writings in the scriptures, and the view of Jewish life. It was a time when people were forced to leave their homeland and live and serve in a foreign land. They were forced to march to Babylon, to live within the Babylonian culture, to celebrate the Babylonian holidays and adjust to the Babylonian assumptions and emphases of life. The Jews could not turn to their temple for worship. They could not enjoy all of their rituals and practices toward making the Sabbath holy, toward taking time for Passover, or toward other aspects that were central to the Jewish tradition. They were literally in exile, they were existentially in exile and they were spiritually in exile. In this strange land, how could they fully and freely be the people they felt they were called to be? In this strange land how could they follow God as they have been called? How could they be people of the Lord when they were in exile? They were a people without their temple. They were a people without their identity. They were a people without their faith and without hope. They were living without hope.

What would life be without hope? What would life be like without Christ?

I heard a story of a man in his 20s who was grieving the death of his father. The funeral was full and sad. Many people said what a great person his father was. Many offered prayers and support. The young man just sat there. During the procession he walked with an empty look on his face, not speaking to anyone. He watched as his father's body was slowly and deliberately lowered into the ground. He gazed on his father's body one last time with a hollow, void look on his face. At the wake he found himself sitting on a chair, offering only the pleasantries of “thank you”, “hello,” and “goodbye.” His closest friend sat down next to him and was present, not saying anything but just being present. After a while, when the overall conversation of the wake moved from the death of his father to the weather, the stock market, and other daily topics of conversation, the young man turned to his friend and said, “I've never felt more alone.” He was in a room full of people, he was surrounded by family and friends, but he felt alone. His grief, his pain isolated him from all those around him. He felt alone. He did not have anywhere to turn for hope, for help. He did not have Christ.

What would life be like without Christ? It is appropriate to ask such a question at this time of year. This time of year when we drown out the question with Christmas

parties, with enveloped holiday cheer and with the sound of pouring eggnog, it is appropriate to stop and ask, "What would life be like without Christmas?" What would life be like without Christ?

When we are living in a life of difficulty we can often feel alone, we need Christ. When we are struggling with our job, even as we go to a home full of people, we can feel alone and we need Christ. When we are wrestling with health issues, even in a room full of nurses and doctors, we can feel alone and we need Christ. When the collection agency continues to call, when demanding teachers continue to pile on work and raise expectations, when friends seem farther and farther away and we feel alone, we need Christ. We need the hope and the promise. We need Christ.

What would life be without Christ? Our world can be isolating. Our world can make us feel very alone. We are wired and taught to be busy, to be always moving and always doing something. If we aren't working hard then we are lazy and worthless. If we aren't over-scheduling our time then we aren't living life to the fullest. If we aren't trying to constantly improve our lives with money, with position and with power then we are wasting our life. We have to overachieve in school, we have to overachieve at work, we have to overachieve with our family and we have to overachieve with ourselves. We are called, challenged and pushed to go farther and farther no matter what the limits and the cost. And when we try to stop and catch our breath, when we try to take a moment to just sit down and rest we are painted as lazy, as second rate, and as not truly and fully living life. We don't want to take too much time to visit with our friends, we don't want to take too much time to visit with our elders, and we don't want to take too much time to visit with our own family because that would be precious time wasted. What happens is that we are pulled away from ourselves in our rush to live life as we are dictated to live. We are pulled away from our essence, our hope and our energy, and we become empty, hollow shells going through life but not fully living life. Where is the meaning? Where is the hope? Where is Christ?

When McMurphy, from the book and the movie *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* went to a mental institution he assumed he would serve the rest of his prison sentence with comfort and ease. He played himself off as deranged so that he would no longer serve in a work camp, but instead enjoy the comforts that he assumed were part of the institution. Yet he found that the culture, the people and the way of life in the institution was one where he could not fully live. He could not enjoy life in the way that he felt he needed to enjoy it. He could not live in this strange land, he could not handle the rules, the eerie and calm group sessions, he could not handle the cold calculating nurse and the lack of joy which was so prevalent in the white halls. He felt as if he was in exile.

So many of us are living as if we are exiles. So many of us are struggling through life without Christ. So many of us are living life without the hope and the promise of our Lord. So many of us are living life without Christ. We are detached, we feel an emptiness, a gnawing and a yearning for more. We are living without Christ.

As people of God, as Christians, or as people yearning to follow Christ maybe we feel as if we are in exile. Maybe we feel as if we are living in a world that goes against the grain of our faith. Maybe we feel as if we are living in a world that rejects the values and the morals that we ascribe to through Christ. Maybe we feel that love is more important than power, that mercy is more important than vengeance and that peace is more important than security. Yet the currents of the world are so strong that we find it

difficult to hold onto our own footing. The winds of the world blow with such ferocity that we cannot stand on our own, and are pulled against our will. We are surrounded by temptations, by lures and by traps calling and wooing us to turn from the way of the cross. We try and try to hold our own, but it is difficult, it is challenging and it is isolating. So we let go. We forget about the birth and the cross. We forget about Christ and we return to the life of the world. We live without Christ.

### *Movement 2 – The Desert*

Maybe it feels as if we are living in a wilderness, in a barren land, or in a desert. Maybe it feels like we are living in a place where there is not a lot which can offer sustenance, not a lot of shelter. Maybe it feels like we are living in a place where the elements, the surroundings do not offer support but instead threaten our lives. It feels like we are living in a desert. We need the coming of Christ.

We have been looking at the promises of the Lord. This is the promise that we have been given through Christ. This is the promise that is harkened with Christmas. We have been considering the world that will be: a time of peace, a time of harmony and shalom with all creation. It is a utopia that we have been expecting. The difficulty when facing such promises and visions we begin to look at our own life and situation with dreary eyes. Like looking over the fence at our neighbor's yard, the clean cut grass, the flower beds and well groomed shrubberies and then at our own disheveled yard, and we yearn for something more. We aren't there and maybe it is because we are not with Christ. We read these visions and we yearn for that impossible promise of utopia, increasing our own despair with our current life, our current situation and struggles. The promise offers less and less comfort as we struggle with our finances, our health, our loved ones, our security and our hope. We need the coming of Christ.

Imagine the Jews in Babylon hearing these promises from Isaiah. Image the growing despair, the growing sadness as they yearn for their homeland. The promise is put before them, but it always seems beyond reach. The promise is out there, but it is a tease, a cruel joke as the tears well up and the pain of life continues. They need to return home, we need the coming of Christ.

What we want is to live in a utopia. What we want is to live in a world that does not have pressures that does not pull or push us away from our faith and our values. What we want is a world that is perfect, but that world is not here. Without Christ, we are in the desert, in a feeling of isolation and despair. Without Christ we are in the desert, struggling to survive. Without Christ we are in the desert wondering if we are truly alive.

### *Movement 3 – The Internal Desert (Our Life is Hard)*

What will happen is that eventually we will start to feel as if our own life is a desert and a wilderness. We will start to feel as if our own life is barren and wasted. The pulling and the pressures will lead to our own alienation. The desert will seep into our lives, and take over our lives. We will become the desert.

Karl Marx argued in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* that a worker becomes alienated from himself in an environment where the worker has no connected interest in the product of the work. Marx describes the environment as a kind of desert where there is no water, no sustenance, and no hope. When we are engaged in the world and work just to hold onto our own sense of identity than we come to a point

were we feel alienated from the world and even alienated from ourselves. The wilderness of the world brings us to a point of despair.

No longer will we be looking out at the wilderness of the world, but now we will be looking at the wilderness of our own lives. No longer will we be trying to hold onto our own identity, but we will just be holding on. McMurphy ended up getting electroshock treatment and lost his life in one way or another. He became the wilderness he was so desperately trying to change. In the movie *American Beauty* the main character described his life as one where he was already dead. He was a wilderness. We can reach that point when we are worn down with our efforts, when we are beaten down with our attempts and we feel like we are shells, like we are husks living a zombie life but not fully alive. The pressures of life, the expectations of life have mounted so high that we can no longer hold them off. It feels like the wilderness that Isaiah describes.

Our hands grow weak and our legs are tired. Fear grows in our hearts for the safety and sake of ourselves and our family. We can no longer see hope or hear words of peace – it is like we are blind and deaf. We limp through life, and we lose our speech. The ground we walk on burns, and we feel threatened by jackals, by those without morals or scruples who look to take advantage of us at any turn. We are the wilderness, we are the barren land, and we are the desert.

St. John of the Cross describes this as a dark night of the soul. It is a moment of isolation and despair. It is that moment when it feels as if you cannot see any stars, the moon and the sun have set and hope is gone. And the harder we try to pull ourselves out of the night, the harder we try to change things and make things different the darker the night. The dark night of the soul is that long night of despair and isolation. It is that time of existential angst. St. John talks about a sensual darkness, a spiritual darkness, and then the darkness of your soul. When you are sitting alone in your room, nursing your pain, you know about the dark night. When you are lying awake in the middle of the night wrestling with your anxieties and your demons you know about the dark night. When you feel detached from your family and friends you know about the dark night. When you feel distant from God, and every time you pray you feel nothing, you know about the dark night. The winds of the wilderness in your life has stirred the sand to a point that the sun is blotted out and darkness covers the land. The pressures, the expectations and demands of the world, of your family, of your friends, of your life has pulled and torn and brought you to a place of wilderness.

#### *Movement 4 – Metanoia*

Yet Christ is coming. The birth is coming and we will be changed by God. We will be transformed by our Lord. We will be changed by God. Ignatius of Loyola was a soldier, a man who served and took care of himself. He did not live a religious life but one focused on power; he was living life without Christ. Yet when in battle a cannonball broke his leg, his life changed. He spent time reading the Bible and other religious books, and then decided to give his life to Christ. After spending several months in a cave he emerged a different person, a changed person, a person walking with the Lord. Ignatius of Loyola was changed.

Christ is coming and we can be changed as well. God can work through us and with us. God can lift us up and give us hope. Like a butterfly coming out of its cocoon we can be made a new, different person. We can be changed.

In the passage from Isaiah we hear of change. Isaiah is giving hope to a people in exile of a transformed landscape. We can read this same passage and find hope for a transformed landscape of our own lives. We can find hope for a transformed landscape where flowers bloom. Our hands will be made steady and our legs sure. Our fear will be vanquished. Our eyes will be opened to the presence of the Lord and our ears shall hear the Word of God. Our limbs will not hold us back, and we will have a voice to sing God's praises. We will be transformed to a person of hope, a person of peace, and a person of joy. The utopia we yearn for will begin with us. We will have what is called a "metanoia," a changing and turning of all of who we are. Wesley described it as a warming of the heart; a turning towards the Lord.

We start walking with Christ, we start living with Christ with an initial conversion. It starts with our initial yes. Like that moment when the addict says, "I have a problem" that moment when we say "I believe in Jesus Christ" we begin to live in hope. Our eyes are opened, our ears are opened, and we will be able to live in the glory of the Lord. In that moment when the darkness becomes too great, in that moment when the isolation becomes overwhelming, in that moment when we can no longer bear the burdens of our life, we turn to God and offer all that we have and all that we are. When the demands of the world are more than we can reject, we turn to the Lord. When the wilderness and the exile leads to despair, it leads to the Tillichian moment of despair when we realize that we have nothing to stand upon. Yet God can be our foundation and can give us something to stand upon. God can give us hope when we can find none. God can transform our wilderness into a paradise. Maybe we have said yes before, but we feel distance for God. Take this moment to ask God to take over your life again. God has not left you, more than likely we have stopped listening to God. Listen to God, offer your life, your burdens to God and be transformed.

#### *Movement 5 – Walking the Holy Way*

Yet we do not stop with an initial change. We do not stop with an initial turning to the Lord, but start a new life. This is not just a change of landscape, but our eyes are opened to a new way, a new path to walk. A highway will be there, it will be called the Holy Way, and with our eyes opened we will be able to see this way. We will be called to walk upon this way. We will be called to live in this way with our new lives. It is like living the 12-step program after that initial moment of admittance. One does not just stop drinking, but instead one adapts an entirely new way of life. Wesley called for a warming of the heart, but then a living into Christian holiness. It is salvation, but then sanctification. Sanctification is the living in our salvation here and now. It is working towards and being the people that we have been called to be by God. Last week I asked you to embrace the peaceable kingdom that God promised; when we walk the Holy Way, we are embracing this kingdom.

I'm not suggesting that the world will be changed. I'm not suggesting that things will get better, but you will be changed, and the way you live can be changed. Like moving from a pessimist to an optimist point of view, you will see things differently because you have been claimed by God.

This is a walk of faith and trust. It is trust that we will not falter as we walk with the God of mercy, with peace and with forgiveness. Yet God promises that we will not fall or go astray. The Holy Way cuts right through the temptations, the briars and the

thorns of the world, we are called to walk that Holy Way. Our transformation is not a once-only thing, but a process, and a continual changing that we all have to live into. We are not done being Christian with our baptism but are constantly working on being Christian.

Think of the church. As a church we are called to again and again give our burdens, our worries and our concerns to the Lord. As a church we are called to ask for God's guidance in every way we struggle. There are times when it feels like the church is a wilderness, ask for God's intervention. Then we are to walk, as a church, on the Holy Way before us. We are to walk through the world in the way of the Lord.

We are waiting for Christ to come, and lead us in this way. We are waiting for Christ to come and guide us in this way. We are waiting for Christ to come, to give us the assurance and the guidance to the Holy Way of the Lord.

### *Movement 6 – Agents of God*

And we will be walking towards this dream of utopia. We have been looking forward to the promises, we have been trusting in the promise, and now let us ask God that we be a part of the promise. When we walk down that Holy Way, that path of the Lord which cuts right through the world, we will then be calling others and witnessing to others to the time of the Lord. We won't be turning from the world, but we will be engaging the world but from the Lord's place. We will be witnessing to the world, but while standing on Holy Ground. We will be in the world, but as transformed people, people who can see, who can sing, and who can offer joy. As we live into our salvation, ask the Lord to use you. As we walk the Holy Way of the Lord, ask God to use you so this impossible dream of utopia, this time of lame walking, of the blind given sight and of the deaf hearing will indeed be a time in the here and now.

This time has already begun with the coming of Christ. This time is already here with the life of Christ, for with Christ the blind have received their sight, the lame walk, the lepers have been cleansed, the deaf can hear, the dead have been raised, and the poor have had good news brought to them. This utopia is here and with the return of Christ it will reach its culmination. Let's be a part of it. Let's walk in the way of the Lord though all the highways and byways of the world. Let's walk in the way of the Lord through all of the corners of the world. Let's be a witness to the world on behalf of the utopia, the holy land where we are all called to live. Pray the prayer of Francis saying,

Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace;  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
Where there is injury, pardon;  
Where there is doubt, faith;  
Where there is despair, hope;  
Where there is darkness, light;  
And where there is sadness, joy.  
O Divine Master  
Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;  
To be understood, as to understand;  
To be loved, as to love;  
For it is in giving that we receive,  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,

And it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.  
Be an instrument of the Lord. Give your sorrows. Trade your sorrows for the glory and the hope of the Lord. Give God your burdens and live with the hope that you may still be hurt by the world, but you won't be broken. You may still be persecuted but you won't be beaten. You will be walking and praising the Lord. Trade your sorrows with the Lord and take on the utopia, the holy, the blessed life that is promised to us all.  
AMEN