

# *It's not 'The Most Wonderful Time of the Year'*

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*Preached at the Lower Merion Baptist Church*

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Isaiah 64:1-9

*"There is no one who calls on your name..."*

## **1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Advent**

The world is full of optimists and pessimists. The glass is half empty or half full, it is partly cloudy or partly sunny, things are only going to get better or they are only going to get worse. (It is always fun when you throw the existentialist in the mix who claims that everything is nothing, and there is no glass at all.) The world is full of optimists and pessimists who are living through a similar life, and see things differently. They are looking at the same coin, but see one side or the other – negative or positive, smiling or frowning, raining or shining. Mark Twain has a lot to say about optimists, but my favorite is, “that optimist of yours is always ready to turn hell’s background into a playground.” These are two views of the same reality.

With every news story we hear, we always want to hear the other side, we want to know the story that is not being heard. I saw a clip on Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show* about a newspaper in Camden that was paid by the city to write news with a positive spin. It may be refreshing for a while, but I imagine that others would be curious about the “other side” of the news” Just like the optimist and the pessimist; there are always a number of ways to view a situation, a glass of water, and reality.

In the passage we read today from Isaiah, we find the Israelites stuck in a pessimist view. They feel beaten, they feel downtrodden, and they feel dejected. They have been defeated militarily, they have been forced to leave their homeland and move to a foreign land, and when they had finally returned home a generation later, they were still under military threat by surrounding countries, they were struggling with their resources, and their country was in ruins. They were a people who could no longer look up. In their memory was a time of great kings like David and Solomon. It was a time when they were strong and secure, a time when Israel as a nation shined, but those times were lost. Those kings were gone, and the country was nothing more than a pile of rubble with broken walls and a broken infrastructure. They were a people who could no longer look up. “Where is God?” they would cry out, but received no answer. In their memory were times of great prophets, of Elijah and Elisha, of Moses and Abraham. That was a time when someone could stand on the temple steps and cry out, “thus says the Lord,” and the people knew that God was indeed still with them. It was a time when the people could look up and find some hope because their prophet, their spiritual leader was there to guide and direct their thoughts. Yet those prophets are past, those times are past, and it seems as if God is now silent. Hope is gone, God’s presence is absent, and the people are falling into a sinful society. They are a people who can no longer look up.

This passage is a lament. It is a lament crying for a time when God shook the mountains and the sky to show the other nations that there is no other God but the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is a lament crying for a time when the prophet, the spiritual leader would guide the people towards righteousness and justice so they would not stray from the eyes of God. This passage is a lament of a people that feel abandoned, lost, cursed, and sinful. Their self-esteem is beaten, their moral has hit bottom.

In the very end of the book, *Animal Farm*, the working animals – the chickens, the cows, the horses, the mule and all others have been starved, lied to, betrayed, and oppressed. With a hard heart they look one more time at the pigs who had led them, and realize that the pigs have misled them. All they can do is look down in despair. Like the animals gathered around the barn with hopes dashed, the Israelites look around their own life and all they can do is look down.

Perhaps we too can relate, perhaps we too have been or are in that place in our lives where it may seem

that all is lost, that all is hopeless. The scholar, Diane Jacobson said, “This lament sets Advent in context of a real world in which things are not going well. The world is not a perfect place; people are disillusioned.” Perhaps you have been their as well, and you can find yourself crying out with all of Israel for a new hope in this gray and beaten life.

Perhaps, but today, during the Advent season, we are pulled towards the optimist view. Be happy, be joyous, look up and see that the sky is blue. Have you felt this pull? Have you noticed this call? It surrounds us when we hear that this is the “season for giving, sharing, smiling,” and on and on. This is a time for shopping so we can share true happiness with others through material goods. This is a time for dancing and singing hokey Christmas tunes no matter where you are spiritually. It is the time when we look at how much stuff is sold and celebrate when people spend a lot of money. We don’t worry about how much debt is incurred in the spending; instead we are told not to be a scrooge and to focus on the bright side of the coin. This is the “most wonderful time of the year,” or so we are told. We are called to look up at the blue, blue sky.

A couple of years ago I was at Disney World – the most magical place on earth. At Disney there is a parade just about every day at noon. Because it was the Christmas season, the main theme was, Christmas. There were a number of shiny, happy professional dancers jumping and smiling and singing, “It’s the most wonderful time of the year.” Do you know this song? It is very upbeat, very positive and very compelling. It is one of those songs that will just stick in your head no matter what... just like “Small World.” Well I was standing there watching these happy people, the Mickey Mouse dressed in the Santa outfit, the Snow White passing out candy canes, and the lyrics pulling me in – “with kids jingle-belling and everyone telling you be of good cheer it’s the most wonderful time of the year.” Then I looked up and the blue sky – the sky of the Christmas spirit, the sky of candy canes and fruit cake, the sky of egg-nog and Santa Clause, the sky of capitalism and spending power, of Disney theatrics and cheap sentimentalism, and I was pulled in. It is part of the whole Disney production, and is true for our greater society.

The sky is fake. The happiness is so overwhelming that we can’t escape it, we can’t run away from it, we are drawn into it – and there is something artificial about it. Karl Marx said that the people, in their difficult working conditions, in their misery and pain will turn to religion as their opiate to numb them from the pain of reality. Have we done the same with the Holiday season? Have we also used the cheer, sappy sentimentalism in the songs, and the sweet taste of egg-nog to act as our opiate? Have you noticed that the clear blue sky of the Holiday season is fake or have you given in? Yet we are still compelled to look up and swoon in this time of year.

The reality is that our lives are mixed bitter/sweet. Our lives are a mixture of joy and sorrow. We need to look not up, not down, but all around us. We need to look and see the joy a couple is experiencing with a new born. We need to look around and see the sorrow one is facing with the loss of a loved one. We need to look around and see the joy of family gathering. We need to look around and see the sorrow of families that have been broken. We see the joy of a full table for all to gather around, to share and enjoy in eating, and we see the sorrow of the empty table, the empty stomachs, and the cries for some substance. We see the joy of the music, the memories, and the sorrow that so many carry during the holidays. There are many different sides to look at.

In the classic movie, *The Best Years of our Lives* three soldiers return home after WWII, and look forward to a happy-go-lucky existence. But adjustment is not that easy. For the amputee he has the joy of being with his family and sweetheart, but the pain of adjusting back to normal life. For the banker he faces the reality of denying loans, taking chances and looking to the bottom line – his joy is found in drinking. For the Soda Jerk, his first wife is thrilled to see him and then leaves him for the glamorous life and he gets a job in a junkyard. These are the best years of their lives and they are neither good nor bad, but bitter and sweet. This is our reality. We are to look for more than the negative or the positive, but the real. When we look at the mixture of tears and laughter, of pain and comfort, of the dirt, sweat and blood of life, then our cry goes up to God with the Israelites asking for direction towards God’s holy presence, and we realize that things are not right. Even with the joy, we know that things are not right. The joy is still not enough to over the sobering reality that this is not yet the most wonderful time of the year, because we are not yet there. We cry for God’s intervention because we know that life, the world, and the conditions of society is not as God intends them to be. Oppression is still real, racism is still real, economic disparity is still real, hunger is still real, homelessness is still real, and no flashy song, and no well-polished TV special will change that reality. Where do we place the real and true

joy in a world that is still calling for a lament? How do we make sense of the laughter in the midst of the tears and cries of anguish? We look around us and see the mess that is reality – it is bitter it is sweet.

It is here where the church is truly needed most. The church cannot be forced into the happy corner of holiday sentimentalism. The church cannot be relegated just to the misery of least of our society. The church is to be the herald to the world, a world of pessimists and optimists, a world that looks at one view or another, and points out God's world, God's reality. As the church, we mediate between God and the world through the grace of Jesus Christ. So the church is to point to the joys, the hopes, the beauty of the earth and show where God is present in those blessings. We look to the holiday season and show where the celebration is appropriate and necessary. When shoeboxes are collected and sent full of toys and necessary items, we celebrate the hope. When food is collected and served we celebrate the response of God's children. When individuals make an effort to think of others the church cries out the joy of celebration.

At the same time, the church is to keep people's eyes on the disparity of our world. When workers are laid off, the church is to lift up each family as precious and in need. When bombs fall the church is to lift up each individual who effected by the violence and destruction. When hatred is spread, the church is to stand up and say "no." When people are tired, the church is to open its doors, and say here you can have rest. When people feel beaten the church is to open its doors and offer hope.

One of my favorite pictures of the church comes from the movie *On the Waterfront*. The workers are oppressed, beaten and living in fear. The priest and the church offer a place of safety, a place to find hope and a place to stand up and reclaim their dignity. In the darkness, in the mist and steam of the waterfront, the church offers a beam of light. The church is to offer God's reality to the world. Especially in this Advent season, it is a reality that celebrates what is right, and opens our eyes to what is wrong. It is a reality that offers hope and a reality that demands action.

Avery Dullis (whom I mentioned last week) describes this model of the church as a sacrament. The word may be difficult for our Baptist tongues, but the concept makes sense. The church is to be the instrument through which the grace of God is shed and shared into the world. The grace that calls us to live a righteous life, and gives us the hope to live that life can come to the world through the church. In this time of sacrine sentimentality, of fake blue skies and real suffering, the church is needed most.

What can we offer but the hope and the example that is the Advent season? Remember that the Israelites were looking for someone to connect them with God. Aren't we doing the same? Aren't we also looking for that holy person who can bring us close to God? That is Christ – the one who offers us an intimate relationship with God – the one who is God. And in this Advent season, that is the hope we offer. Not a hope that we should be expecting presents. Not a hope that we should be expecting great shrimp cocktail and tasty egg-nog. Not a hope that we should be expecting one day to spend with all of the family. But that we should be expecting the return, the birth of the one who will speak God's words to us. The return, the birth of one who will share God's forgiveness with us. The return, the birth of the one who will walk with us in our poverty, who will dance with us in our joy, who will cry with us in our grief, who will laugh with us in our celebrations and who will make all of these experiences holy and profound. That is the reason for the season, the anticipated return of Christ, and the anticipated birth of Christ. That is the hope, which the church can offer, the promise that the church can share. It is a kind of liberation theology, a hope and a salvation, which meets the people where they are and as they are.

So what are some of the concrete ways we can be a part of the Advent season in the world and share the true grace of Christ in the rituals and celebrations? What if you bought livestock for another nation instead of a present for yourself? What if this church decided to sponsor a missionary for the Christmas season? What if you invited people to church to experience this season? What if you spend each day in prayer and asked Christ to open your eyes to all the sorrow and all the hope in the world. Ask Christ to give you the strength to sit and watch and wait for his return. Ask Christ to give you the strength to avoid the false joy and commercial sentiment and to share the true joy and real grace of our expected savior. Only with the return of Christ, will we truly experience "the most wonderful time of the year."

AMEN