

In the Meantime
Isaiah 35:1-10 and Matthew 11:2-10
First Presbyterian Church
December 11, 2016
Rev. Glen Bell

What is your favorite Christmas carol? Silent Night? O Little Town of Bethlehem? O Come, All Ye Faithful? It is about as difficult as naming your favorite child, isn't it?

This year for me I believe it is Joy to the World. "Joy to the world, the Lord is come, let earth receive her king; let every heart, prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing . . ." I am excited that we are going to sing it next Sunday morning, during our Worship Arts Christmas Celebration, *and* at both our 4:00 pm and 7:00 pm Christmas Eve celebrations at Payne Park Auditorium, *and* at our one morning service at 10:00 am on Christmas Day.

We are going to be joyful!

We are going to sing and sway and tap our feet and enjoy ourselves. For many of us, our cherished ones will be close, and we will rejoice with the exchange of gifts, hugs and embraces, and a grand meal together.

But the joy of Christmas is more. The name of this Christmas carol is not Joy to Glen, not Joy to Mariah, not Joy to Wes, it's Joy to the World. Christmas is not only my joy, but a joy to the world. All of the earth receives her king; every heart prepares him room. And the wonderful song of rejoicing is taken up not only by my family, my friends, my cherished ones, but the angels in heaven and all of nature around us. Fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains will repeat the awesome joy.

Isaiah's prophecy is clear: The wilderness will be glad, and the desert shall rejoice. All of nature will sing to the Lord as they witness the glory of God's presence.

Noel Leo Erskine of Candler School of Theology is right: "God shows up in the desert, in the barren places of life" to grant us renewal and restoration. God is for "those who are faint in heart and weak at the knees." Even if your heart is breaking as you sing this year, even if you are lost in the memories of those you miss this Christmas, God shows up to embrace you.

Our Gospel lesson from Matthew this morning begins with a question. John the Baptist is in prison, and he sends his disciples to Jesus. "Jesus, are you the One? Are you 'The One'? Will it all happen now, the restoration of nature, the rejoicing of angels in heaven, the healing of our hearts, the culmination of God's kingdom? Now, is it now?

"Or is there another, yet to come?"

Is it Now? Or Later?

That's one of the eternal questions, isn't it? I run into that when I'm ordering Christmas gifts online. "Order by December 22," it says on the front of the catalog, "and it will be in your home by Christmas Day." Yes! Now! Now is what we like; now is what we wish for. But then, of course, I ordered a few items for Anne and the kids, only to hear that dreaded word, just like coal in a stocking: backordered. It won't be Now. It will be Later.

One of the last responses of Jesus in this conversation with John's disciples is to answer their question with a question. Sounds like Jesus, doesn't it? They ask, "Are you the One, now? Or is there another to come later?"

Jesus says, "Why did you go out into the wilderness? What did you go out there to see?" In other words, "What did you hope would happen out there when you were listening to the preaching of John the Baptist?"

Oh, we know the answer. They were hoping for God's prophet, for a divine messenger to prepare God's way. They were hoping for a blossoming desert, a singing creation, a coming God who strengthens the weak hands and feeble knees, who opens the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf, who leads all the peoples home with everlasting joy.

They were hoping for all that, now.

So are we.

We know all those hopes. They are our hopes.

My husband is dead and gone, O Lord. I'm lonely and tired. When will you heal creation and bring us back together again?

Hate and discord seem to have the upper hand, O God. There are all kinds of racism and discrimination afoot. When will you return in glory and make it all right?

Refugees are abused and dying far from home. The homeless are tired and hungry. Is now the time? Please, God. Please.

We live in the land of In Between, in the land of Not Yet. We live depending on God's promises, waiting, hoping and yearning for Later. We are a Now People – but it all doesn't happen right now.

This is frustrating and difficult. It is frustrating when we are not quite old enough to drive, not quite old enough to head up to New York City on our own. It is difficult when our son or daughter will not be coming home for Christmas, when that gift is backordered, when the chemo is going to last for several more months, when it will be another week before we sing "Joy to the World."

We want Jesus now, finally, completely. We want to walk by sight, not by faith. We want to live by what our eyes can see and our hands can touch, not by trust in the promises of God.

Jesus knows this. He knows us. He knows that you and I really don't like hearing "meanwhile" or "in the meantime." He knows that we want to get to the end of the story, the glad celebration, the unwrapping of all the gifts, the realization of every divine promise of deliverance and salvation and restoration.

But today, he reminds the disciples of John the Baptist and every one of us how important it is to live faithfully in the meantime.

The first response of Jesus in this conversation is to teach them – and us – about living faithfully in the strength of God's promises. "Go and tell John," he said to them, "what you hear and see now: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor hear great good news."

Every day will not be the final day of complete restoration. Every day will not be the culmination of nature's longing. Every day will not be marked by the eternal end of discord and the healing of the nations.

But every day, you and I can witness God at work. Every day we can be a part of God's goodness and greatness as we trust in the promises.

These are the blessings of Advent for us, as we await the final joy. These are the marching orders for our days and our lives, as we step forward in faith. We heal the sick. We wash the dirty and stained. We proclaim the gospel that enlivens hearts and changes lives. We work for good with generosity and grace and energy and commitment.

As usual, it is a strange gospel word for us today, a surprising message. The time is coming, but not yet. But even though the word is "later," not "now," the promises of God are still strong and active in this very moment:

They fill us with the strength to bless and heal and give and forgive. They fill us with the strength of patience and peace. They fill us with the energy to wait, even while we lean forward with anticipation and joy.

May it be so for us today, in the meantime.