

Sermon 12/15/2019

A strange thing happened on Christmas night last year. You may remember it from the news. But events like that are becoming so common, that you probably ignored it—

In a small town in Pennsylvania, a man got into an armed standoff with police. Such events occur so often nowadays, we're likely to forget the details of any particular episode. This episode, however, is different. This man was acting erratically and shooting at police officers. Members of the local SWAT team surrounded him and tried to talk him into surrendering, but he wouldn't listen. This standoff lasted for ten hours, and it could have ended tragically. But it didn't. A police negotiator with the SWAT team gave up talking with the suspect; instead, he began singing. The song he sang was the old Bing Crosby song, "I'm dreaming of a White Christmas . . ."

Then something dramatic happened. The song soothed the armed man so much that he gave himself up to police without anyone getting hurt. That's a message all by itself.

We've all experienced the power of hearing a particular song that moves us to tears or joy or nostalgia. It's especially true at this time of year when we hear traditional Christmas songs around the clock. They're so familiar, we don't even have to think about them. For most of us there is at least one Christmas song that really puts us in the mood for the season.

Our Old Testament Reading today—Isaiah 35:1-10—is appropriate for the Christmas season because it's about the songs of joy that the nation of Israel will be singing when God restores his people and brings Israelite captives and refugees home from foreign lands where they were scattered. For us, it is a picture of the restoration God plans to do through God's *Son*. And the joy on that day will be so overwhelming that everyone will burst into songs of joy—

"The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the LORD, the splendor of our God. Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, 'Be strong,

do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.'

"Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs.

"In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow. And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on that Way. The unclean will not journey on it; wicked fools will not go about on it. No lion will be there, nor any ravenous beast; they will not be found there.

"But only the redeemed will walk there, and those the LORD has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away."

What a vision of God's plan for his people! This vision in Isaiah expresses everything that God is—the Giver of Life, the Restorer, the Redeemer, the Healer, the One who brings his children home from faraway.

Isaiah 35 is God's note-of-encouragement to a hopeless people. It comes right after a handful of chapters announcing God's judgment against Israel and the devastation they'll face. And then comes chapter 35, with its vision of complete restoration and healing and a homecoming full of singing.

God is speaking to people who are afraid, who have no hope for the future, and this fear has made them weak. You know what that's like—fear saps your focus, disturbs your sleep, ties your stomach up in knots, makes your chest tight. Fear steals your joy in the moment and your hope in the future.

For some of us, the Christmas message of hope, joy, love and peace is drowned-out by the voice of fear whispering in our ear. The people of Israel were living with those voices of fear. Fear made their hands feeble and their knees weak. What does that mean? It means—they are too afraid to lift their hands in praise to God; they are too drained to use their hands for purposeful work. Weak knees keep us from kneeling to pray or walking with God. Weak knees can't support us under the burden of worry and stress. What can restore strength to feeble hands and weak knees? Hope.

Hope that there is a God, and that this God cares about us. Hope that there is a God, and that this God has a plan and a purpose for us. Hope that there is a God, and this God has the power to heal everything that's damaged and fix everything that's broken and revive everything that has withered and free everyone who is captive. That's the kind of hope God wants us to see in the coming of Jesus, his Christ, his Anointed One. Jesus is the hope of God's presence with us.

That's a good word in every season of the year, especially in times of trial. Jesus is the hope of God's presence. In January, 2010, a magnitude 7.0 earthquake struck Haiti. It destroyed countless structures and killed or maimed tens of thousands of people. As hope for victims began to fade, the discovery of a survivor in the wreckage of a grocery store renewed the resolve of many. Rescuers pulled someone from the rubble eleven days after the earthquake. From a hospital bed, that survivor told reporters that the first thing he wanted to do was find a church to give thanks.

The survivor said he spent his time under the rubble praying, reciting psalms, and sleeping. He summed up his experience saying, "I wasn't afraid because I knew they were searching and would come for me." The message of Isaiah the prophet in chapter 35 and the message of Jesus at Christmas is the same message: God is searching for you and will come for you. God is searching for you and *has* come for you.

That's the hope that Jesus brings—that God cares enough to come to us, no matter where we are. If the presence of Jesus can bring hope to captives in a foreign land, then Jesus can restore anyone's hope. And that brings us to the second point of Isaiah 35 and of the Christmas story—

Jesus is also the hope of *new life* in God. This prophecy is filled with images of withered plants blooming again, dry river beds gushing with fresh water, and people undergoing miraculous healings. This is a vision of God's Realm when his Anointed "Son" comes to restore the world to God's original vision. There will be no death or hurting or mourning. God is making all things new. And when we choose to give our lives to Jesus, he brings the seeds of the Kingdom of God to our minds and hearts, so we start to see new life, new beauty, the new hope God intends for God's people.

Hope in God restores to us the joy of life, the gift of life, the freedom of life, the wonderment of life. Hope in God is our security and our joy.

And finally, the message of Isaiah 35 and the Christmas story is this: Jesus is the hope of a new walk with God.

"...a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on that Way. The unclean will not journey on it; wicked fools will not go about on it. No lion will be there, nor any ravenous beast; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, and those the LORD has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away."

The Way of Holiness starts in the heart of every person who has Jesus' spirit living in them. Jesus promised that his spirit would live in the hearts and minds of all those who put their faith and trust in him. This spirit teaches us the truth of God and leads us into a new way of living as people of God. We no longer wander without a purpose or aim in life. We are walking with God. We are walking toward Zion. The Highway of Holiness is taking us home.