

When the Speechless Sing

Isaiah 35.1-10

Third Sunday of Advent

December 12, 2010

We are telling the Christmas story all wrong, as though it happened two thousand years ago or is going to happen as soon as the church budget is raised. We seem to forget that Christ's name is Emmanuel, God with Us, not just when he sat among us but now...

- Ann Weems, from *We Seem to Forget* (adapted)

Reading

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus ²it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. ³Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. ⁴Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.' ⁵Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; ⁶then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; ⁷the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. ⁸A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray. ⁹No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. ¹⁰And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

In my first Advent meditation two weeks ago, I noted that I would never intentionally make disparaging comments about giving and receiving Christmas gifts. I offered this observation in the interest of transparency and full-disclosure because, truth be known, nobody

James R. "Bo" Crowe
Overland Park Christian Church

loves a Christmas present more than this guy right here. Believe me, with my track record I'd better not come within a country mile of criticizing Christmas gift giving. When I was a kid, I was known as "Bobo the Red Nosed Reindeer," because I always lit the path and led the way to the presents under the tree. On Christmas Eve, we kids would sleep in the same bedroom; or perhaps I should say we waited impatiently, because no one did much sleeping. In its place we spent our time listening for any stirring in the vicinity of the Christmas tree; or awaiting that undeniable sense that it was time to make a streak for the Christmas bounty. I don't know how many times I made it a few feet into the hallway only to hear my dad say, "Go back to bed, Santa hasn't been here yet." As if he would know!

At any rate, when the time finally arrived, I was always first out the door and to the tree. None of the other kids liked this, so I would always be assigned the bed farthest from the door just to give them a fighting chance. But it didn't matter where they put me, I was always first because I loved those gifts... and I still do. For this reason I would never make any disparaging comments about giving and receiving Christmas gifts. I would, however, like to mention one gift that is overlooked year after year; one significant Christmas gift that goes unopened more times than not.

This unique – and uniquely ignored - Christmas gift has my name written all over it. And it has your name written all over it. This is the gift of God's presence among us, in us, and through us at Christmas time. In my estimation today's worship heading hits the nail on the head. We tell the Christmas story all wrong. We live as if it happened two thousand years ago and now remains only a story to be told. Or, we act like the Christmas promise will be realized only in some distant future when our lives have been worn thin, fizzled out, or snatched away. The dead past or the distant future; this is where we relegate the Christmas story.

When we do this we miss the good news of Christmas; we forget that the child's name is Emmanuel; God *with* us. Not God was with us or God will be with us... but God *with* us. At Christmas we can experience what Isaiah announced to the exiles in Babylon... here is your God. God will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the speechless sing for joy.

We tend to think of anything related to salvation - redemption, liberation, ransom, healing - as something that will happen in the future, not something in the here and now. This attitude would have seemed bizarre to Isaiah. He had no notion that he would have to wait until death to be saved. He had no notion that he would have to wait until death to be redeemed. The Old Testament notion of salvation is far richer than this, and occurs in our present. One central image of salvation in the Old Testament is that of God ushering us into a broad space where there's room to spread our wings and fly, where there's room to breathe fully and deeply, room to learn from God, and to receive good things from God.

We limit God's salvation by deferring it to the distant future. We neglect it; just like a Christmas present left unopened, sitting under the tree year after year. Perhaps this will be the year we hear Isaiah's proclamation; here is your God. Perhaps this will be the year we experience Emmanuel, God with us, and the Christ child will be born anew in our hearts and lives. Who knows? Perhaps this will be the year the speechless sing for joy!