



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Longing for Light...We Sing of Our Savior

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

December 28, 2008

First Sunday after Christmas (Year B)

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

Four nights ago this sanctuary was overflowing with the sights and sounds of this magical time in the church year. We saw the beautiful, glowing faces of this community's children as they tried to breathe in everything going on. We saw the beauty of candle-light scattering the darkness. We heard the glorious carols lifted by our pipe organ and carried by our voices, and we delighted in the laughter and celebration that filled our hearts with joy. We saw young and old—from east and west and north and south—gathering together at the table of the Lord. And, in addition to everything else we saw and heard, we listened once more to Luke's familiar story of what happened on that night when Joseph went with Mary to the town of Bethlehem to be registered, that night when God tore open the heavens to come down.

For many of us, Thursday—Christmas Day—was a day for feasting, a day for giving and receiving gifts, or to see and hear the excitement emanating from our children. Christmas is all of these things and more. But at its deepest and best level, this season of Christmas is more than that. It offers us a chance to realize how deeply we are loved—by others, of course—but most of all by God. On Christmas, we celebrate the truth that it is at the heart of the gospel—"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son." Christmas is a time for remembering and celebrating this basic truth of the faith: God loves us more deeply than we can ever fully imagine.

For me at least, this is the time of year for reflection. As one year's end draws near and a new one about to be born, many of us have stopped to consider the context and character of our living. This time of transition is a chance for looking back and looking ahead. But, even as we cast our thoughts in both directions—to past and future—we do not easily forget what's going on around us in the present.

As 2009 approaches—with a new year stretching out before us—we gather to worship the One who ties all time together—the Alpha and the Omega—the beginning and the end. Today we remember and give thanks for a faithful God who has made us children of the covenant. And so, as we reflect on the past year, we look back to see where we shined gloriously, and where our efforts didn't quite measure up. It is a time for us in the church to consider our faithfulness to our covenant with God and to pledge ourselves to renewed discipleship.

Now I suspect that some of you are beginning to think that I'm about to suggest some resolutions for the New Year. You may remember the same comic strip I remember from the classic "Calvin and Hobbes." It was at the end of the year, and Calvin—the precocious child around whom the comic revolved—held in his hand a long list of resolutions. He told his stuffed tiger Hobbes—who came to life in Calvin's presence—that he

had made a whole list of resolutions for the New Year. Hobbes replies, “Oh, that’s wonderful. It’s nice to know that you plan to improve yourself this year.”

But Calvin corrects him immediately. “Oh, these aren’t for me. These are for those around me.”

I don’t know if you’re the type or not, but many people are in the habit of making resolutions for the New Year, and they have their place. They can be beneficial at times, such as those who resolve to spend more time with their families or to eat more vegetables or to stop smoking or to lose some weight. But for the church, resolutions are too surface.

We are much more concerned about renewal—about repentance—about committing ourselves to God with our whole hearts, about renewing our efforts to love God and to serve others, to be better children, and parents, and neighbors, and church members. And we renew our commitment to these things not simply to be better people, and certainly not to earn the love of God. No, the church’s call to renewal is a call to immerse ourselves once more in the story of what God is doing in Jesus Christ—to remember at a deep level all of the mighty acts of God, to remember the profound ways that we are loved and cared for and forgiven and called, and then to sing of what our Savior has done with our whole lives.

Memory is at the heart of this renewal, you see, because the truth is that if we remember who we are as God’s beloved children, as those set apart and made members of the covenant community of the church, our whole lives can then be lived out of that identity, instead of one of the other identities that seeks to seduce us. Our lives can be lived in hope about what will be rather than despair at what now is.

That’s at the heart of what Isaiah is describing at the end of his book. The people have just come home from exile, but their deepest hopes are dashed. The ripened fields of their memory, the glorious houses, the magnificent Temple—everything was in ruins. They were home, but it wasn’t how they wanted it to be.

Into this environment of communal grief comes today’s passage from Isaiah. The prophet begins his words of hope like this,

*I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.*

And later, as he begins to recount the marvelous deeds of the Lord, Isaiah begins with the supreme faith story of the Jews—the Exodus from Egypt, how God had led them through the waters of the sea to safety in the Promised Land. Story after story is brought to mind of all that God had done to save them in the past. And that’s why, on the edge of this New Year, we are invited to consider again all the ways God has been faithful in the past, and to look into the year ahead with great anticipation for the ways that God will draw near to us.

The Session has adopted a theme to guide our congregation's ministry in 2009. It will be *Reach Out, Renew, Rejoice*. Throughout the year, each of us will be invited to grow in the faith by taking those 3-Rs seriously.

As 2009 begins on Thursday, I want to invite you to get a jump-start on considering how you can Reach Out, Renew, and Rejoice in the year ahead.

Reaching Out may begin with thinking about some people you know who aren't connected in a meaningful way to a congregation and inviting them to join us on the journey here. Or it may mean that you will make an extra special effort to be warm and welcoming, and to greet those you pass in the hallways or sit next to in this sanctuary whenever you're here. Or it may mean going on a mission trip or serving with HARTS or volunteering in the food pantry. There are limitless ways that you can Reach Out—that you can sing of our Savior—with the gift of your life. If you want to talk more directly about some of those possibilities, just give me a call and we can find a place for you to Reach Out with the love of God.

As for the second R—Renew. It may be that you will simply make the determination to be in worship every Sunday, for worship is what gives life and shape to everything the church does. Or it may mean that you will begin to read the scriptures regularly and be guided by them in your life. Or it may mean that you will connect with a Sunday School Class or ask about some ways that you could grow in an area of interest for you. Again, I would be happy to talk with you about ways to Renew your life for ministry.

And the third R—Rejoice. As the new year begins, I want to invite you to consider the things in your life for which you are deeply grateful. Once you come up with some of those things, find a way to celebrate them. It may be that you'll invite someone to share a meal with you to celebrate your friendship. Or it may mean that you'll finally write that note you've been meaning to write, or pick up the phone and call someone for whom you are thankful.

About a week ago, someone brought a gift for Aaron to our door but something else was in the bag as well. It was 2 envelopes—one for Rachel and one for Sarah—and on them was a great phrase: "A just because gift." I think that's what our Rejoicing can be like this year—we don't have to wait for some grand thing to celebrate, but rather we can be mindful of the blessings in our life and celebrate them in large and small ways whenever they come to mind.

So, as this New Year dawns, remember who you are. You are God's beloved children.

When we commit ourselves to hearing again and again the stories of God's amazing, forgiving, welcoming, saving love, we will discover the overwhelming call God has extended to each of us, to commit our whole selves to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So what does 2009 hold? We have no way of knowing. For some, it will be a year of great joy. For others, it will be a year of deep pain. For all of us, it will be another year where we are invited to discover over and over again—in seasons of joy and seasons of pain—that we are held at all times by the God who loves us enough to tear open the heavens so that we might be saved. Thanks be to God for this incredible gift of God's love.