

Hope Come Down
based on Isaiah 64:1-12, David Jahnke, 11/26/17

This week we join the third of three "Isaiahs." First Isaiah spoke to his people as Assyria was threatening. Second Isaiah spoke more than 100 years later after his people had been held exiled to Babylon. He was a great prophet of hope, assuring his people that liberation was on the way. He was right about that but things were less than idyllic when his people returned to Israel. So one of his students, Third Isaiah, now laments all of the trials of a people liberated from captivity but not liberated from internal and external threats and hardship. They were back home but not particularly at home!

This is how it is for us. We have experienced God's liberating truth and mercy. We have times of peace and joy and great hope. But too often we feel threats from within and without that keep us from truly feeling at home.

Third Isaiah calls us to remember God every time these threats come upon us or when we feel ill-at-ease. And the fact that the first Isaiah had disciples and there was a traditional school which studied and honored the original Isaiah, perhaps for a couple of hundred years; this speaks of the importance of having traditions that anchor us in the Lord. And having teachers and counselors whom we can turn to and trust in.

Now it was a bit of a crazy week for the Jahnkes this week. So in the middle of the broken-ness, it was great to be able to turn to a couple of traditions which anchor us all. First we gathered with my brother's family in the city for Thanksgiving. Just to sit around a large table with all kinds of food and family and friends and my getting to say a prayer of thanksgiving in front of people with a wide range of faiths; it all just felt good and right and there were lots of smiles all day. This all echoed the wonderful inter-faith service here on Monday.

We have a tradition on the Friday morning after thanksgiving of putting up the tree and other decorations. But I had a morning meeting and then a graveside service so I told the boys that this would have to wait until later in the day. They handled it well, knowing that it would be happening at some point. They were not even that disappointed when we could only just get started later on. I told them we would do it the next morning and they were able to gladly wait on the good thing which is what Isaiah told his people to do. My boys could trust that the good thing with their father would happen and they could look forward to it because it was a regular event.

That is how traditions bless us and it is a simple example of Advent hope and anticipation. Advent tells us that God has acted so God will act again. We enter into great traditions-- candle lighting, advent calendars, Christmas decorations, special music-- all reminding us of the comfort and joy of the past, pointing us forward to a great culmination at Christmas and thus filling the present with gratitude, anticipation and excitement.

So far, I have basically been talking about family and cultural traditions. And that is all good. I love hearing the classic 20th century American Christmas songs on the radio, written mostly by Jews interestingly enough, and all of the lights in the malls and neighborhoods, and Santa and blow-up decorations. I just saw that we got a new...not r2-d2 but the droid from the most recent movie...blow-up decoration for outside. Like so much around us, it has zero to do with Christmas but the beauty and joy of it all looks and feels right and it is right. These family and cultural traditions have an authority which is appropriate.

But there is a much deeper tradition; a much greater authority who can comfort and and keep us in hope and joy all of the time. This all leads to so much more than a great cultural holiday and pleasant time off with our families. It all points to another world; and to this world being made new.

And when secular traditions replace religious ones, then people find themselves on shaky ground because the foundation is not very deep. It is like having a 5 pound anchor for a 5000 pound boat. It can hold you for a while but when the waves and winds really blow, the boat is going to be rocking and reeling.

This was going in in third Isaiah's day. The people were disappointed in how things turned out back in Israel and they turned to other cultural traditions and religious authorities around them. They maintained a pseudo-faith in Yahweh but they also thought it would not hurt to look for fruitfulness and security in other gods. And this all led to people fasting and worshipping God one day and then lying, quarrelling and exploiting workers and neighbors the next. And things only got worse for Israel. So Isaiah insisted that the people must return to putting Yahweh and the religious traditions of their forefathers first.

That is where our society is. People have not completely forgotten religion and they have a kind of faith in God. But they have equal or greater faith in the fruitfulness and security of the gods of the modern world-- money and the self. We call this melding of faiths syncretism. It is everywhere today, including in us to a certain degree.

But the true meaning of Christmas teaches us the ancient foundation upon which we must build our lives and society. And the choice is stark; we either believe that the face of God has shined upon the world in Jesus or we do not. If we do not, then God's face remains mostly hidden from our view of the world, and we replace God with what we can see and feel. If we do believe it and we commit to the light that Jesus' teachings shine upon God and the world, Lord, the blessings that come our way. Then it becomes Christmas every day...

I was running last night and reveling in a beautiful night and sunset, smiling like a goofball at everyone I passed. And most were smiling back at me. And it hit me that God is in every sincerely smiling face. Because God took on our flesh in order to smile at every child of his.

One guy would not glance my way and you can tell when it is intentional. And maybe he was just having a bad day. And I immediately thought about how important it was to remember God in him as well. We have to decide whether to look for the face of God in every other person; and whether we want to show the face of God to every person we encounter.

We know how hard this is; and that is does not feel like Christmas every day, even though it is. But we know can wait on God. Because we have seen God's face and His Spirit working wherever we see or hear about the things of Jesus-- people loving, caring and helping others. We can be at peace even when things are not great, because we know that the love and joy which we so long for will return.

So revel in the beauty and the joy of this season. Enjoy cultural and family traditions. But never forget who and what is going on behind the scenes. Remember and commit to Jesus and be prepared for God to reveal himself more and more. It is a wonder to behold; and then make your face and your hands and your heart and mind a part of that revelation. So to the God who has come to earth to make things right, who comes to us every day to continue that work, and will come again to complete His creation be all the power and glory now and forevermore. Amen