

“Reality Check”

November 25, 2007

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Luke 23:33-43

I’m sure you’ve noticed that “the holidays” have begun. Whether or not you celebrate Thanksgiving – and, remember, not everyone does – and whether or not you now have leftover turkey in your refrigerator, you know that the holidays are here. Whether it’s Christmas carols piped into stores of all kinds; or it’s frenzied, nearly-violent shoppers the day after Thanksgiving; or it’s houses lavishly decorated with lights – so much for fighting global warming – the signs of the times are all around us.

Like it or not – and I’m often among the “nots” – the season of eating, spending, and partying is upon us. ‘Tis the season to spend more money than we have to show people that we love them, and ‘tis the season to consume far more food and drink than our bodies need.

Now ... I do know that this is a particularly cynical description of “the holidays.” Cynical ... but accurate. Accurate ... but incomplete. It’s an incomplete description because, at their best, Thanksgiving, Advent, and Christmas truly can be a time of gathering with friends and family, a time of giving – to friends, to family, and to organizations like the Food Bank, Heifer International, and Habitat for Humanity. This season of the year can be a time when we see the blessings in our lives more clearly and share those blessings more generously. This can be a time when we try a little harder to live the truth that the greatest gift any of us has to offer is the gift of ourselves – our time, our talents, our love, our laughter.

If we combine these cynical and non-cynical descriptions of “the holidays,” we get closer to a more accurate picture, but the picture is still incomplete. What’s missing is another, more painful truth. What’s missing is the reality that, for many people, this time of year is a time of acute loneliness, loss, and alienation. For the parents who don’t have enough money to buy their children a new pair of shoes, much less the latest gadget or fashion; for the children of any age who are experiencing their first holiday season without their beloved mother or father or without their beloved partner or spouse; for the children and adults whose families have been sources of abuse and violence instead of love and care ... for all these people, the holidays can be a painful, depressing trial by fire.

I need to name this truth and put it before all of us this morning for two reasons. The first is, simply, pastoral concern. I ask each of you to remember, over the next month, that this time of year can be full of joy and celebration for some and full of heartache and grief for others. Here, in this congregation, we are a holy mix of God’s people, people whose childhood homes were places of safety and people whose childhood homes were places of abuse and fear. We are a holy mix of people, people whose incomes are below the poverty line and people who have long known material wealth and abundance. We are a holy mix, people who have known great pain and great joy.

So I ask you to make room in your lives, your hearts, and this church for the grief *and* the celebration. Take the time to listen to one another – and to your own heart – to hear and then welcome the celebration *and* the grief, the joy *and* the pain. As it says in our bulletin each week, no matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here. To make sure that slogan is more than just a slogan, I ask you to be especially attentive this season to God’s call to offer that radical hospitality, to welcome laughter and tears, celebration and sorrow ... to welcome it in others and in yourselves.

So pastoral concern is the first reason I need to name the reality that this time of year is not all sweetness and light. The second reason I need to name it is because, in its own way, the Christian story names it. I need to name this truth because the Christian story itself isn’t exactly all sweetness and light. If it was, I wouldn’t have been up here a few minutes ago, reading about Calvary, “the place called The Skull,” a place of ridicule, mockery, and crucifixion.

Oh, no, the Christian story is most definitely not all sweetness and light. It is a story that includes humiliation, betrayal, abandonment, and anguish. And, strangely enough, in the church’s liturgical calendar, it includes all these things on the last Sunday before Advent. We’re taken to Calvary and to the cross the very week before Advent, when we begin to anticipate and prepare for the birth of God’s very presence in our lives and our world on Christmas Day.

But why? Why should we come to this part of the Christian story today, and why should I stand up here and remind all of us that, for many people, this is an especially painful and lonely season? Why? Because here and now, at the beginning of the hustle and bustle of the secular version of Christmas, it’s a good time for a reality check. We need a reality check, in the midst of the manufactured good cheer and the commercial portrayal of Christmas as a season of happy families and consistently good times filled with fun. When we are surrounded by images of what we can and “should” be if only we buy the right gifts, wear the right clothes, drive the right cars, and give and attend the right parties, we need a reality check. We need a reality check reminding us that in any human life, even – *especially* – in a life lived fully and radically open to the grace and spirit of God, pain, loneliness, and anguish are very real possibilities.

But how can this sort of reality check be considered good news, so that I can stand up here and claim that I’m preaching the Gospel? You may think I’m crazy, but I think there *is* good news here. I think it’s in what it says about us as human beings and in what it says about God.

What this morning’s reminder of the crucifixion says about us as human beings is that pain, loneliness, and anguish can come into any life, even into the life of someone like Jesus, in whom the power and presence of God were tangible. The good news is that when pain, loneliness, or anguish comes into your life, it doesn’t mean that you’ve failed, or that God is punishing you, or that there’s something wrong with you. It means, simply, that you are a human being, living on a planet with billions of other human beings, and it means that you do not need to be ashamed when you’re not feeling happy, joyous, and free.

And what’s the good news about God in this morning’s reminder of the crucifixion? The good news I hear in this part of the Christian story is that God in Christ – and God in all of us – shares our human experience. In the words of the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith, God shares “our common lot,” so that none of our pain,

none of our fear, none of our despair is alien to God. God is with us in all of it ... but that's not the end of the story. The end of the story – the “end” that is the beginning we celebrate on Easter morning – proclaims that pain, fear, despair, even death, will never have the last word, because the last word belongs to God's love. The good news, then, is that God's redeeming love is stronger than our deepest pain or our greatest anguish, and, as we heard from the prophet Jeremiah this morning, God has promised to gather and care for all who have been scattered or lost.

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While I was on retreat earlier this month, I encountered a story that provides a similar reality check. It is a story that reminds us that pain and heartache can and almost certainly will come into every human life, and it's a story that reassures us God in Christ – and God in and through other human beings – will walk with us in our times of heartache and despair. The story is from the book *Words for the Journey*.

One afternoon, a father went to pick up his daughter from kindergarten. As he waited, he saw many of the other children leaving the building, but there was no sign of his daughter. After enough of a wait that he started to wonder if he should go in to investigate, he finally saw his daughter walking toward him. He could tell something was wrong, so as soon as she got into the car he asked his daughter, “Honey, what's wrong? You look upset.”

She told him that as the children were getting ready to leave, her friend had dropped the ceramic bowl he'd been making for his parents, and he was very sad. The little girl's dad responded, “Oh, so you stayed behind to help him pick up the pieces?” “No, Daddy,” she said. “I stayed to help him cry.”

“I stayed to help him cry.” Here, in one short story, is an expression of God's promise to stay with us and help us cry when we need to cry, help us grieve when we need to grieve ... and also help us laugh and sing when we need to laugh and sing.

Here, too, in one short story, is God's invitation, God's call to each and every one of us, to be the physical manifestation of that promised presence, to let God become incarnate in us, to help one another cry, so that no one's pain or grief will ever have the last word.

My beloved brothers and sisters, at all times and in all seasons, but especially in the month ahead, be open to the full reality of human life – the joy and the sorrow, the hope and the despair, the celebration and the grief. Be particularly attentive to one another, and be willing to stay behind to help someone cry.

And when – not “if” – *when* you are the person who needs someone to stay behind and help you cry, ask for what you need. Ask your friend, your pew mate, your family, maybe even your minister. Ask. Ask for what you need, for, in that simple act, you will be preparing yourself for the new life and the new blessing God is longing to give to you and to the world this Christmas.

As we move once again into the adventure of Advent, toward Christmas Day, trust that God has not limited Godself to becoming fully present in only one human being in only one far away place some 2000 years ago. Trust that the Spirit of the Living God, the Spirit so apparent and powerful in Jesus, seeks a home in your heart and your life. Make room for the Spirit, and prepare to welcome her with love. She is seeking to dwell within you forever, in your sorrow and in your joy, in your tears and in your laughter.

For that and for so much more, thanks be to God. Amen.

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