

## **"Consolation and Celebration"**

Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:8-20

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

December 21, 2014 – 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent – Rev. Ronald Botts

We've lost something over the years when churches stopped being built with bell towers. Our building is an example of modern architecture where a functional tower would neither fit nor have much of a purpose. The use of a bell was primarily to summon people to worship, to alert them that it was time to move from the home and fields to join in the Sunday service. Today it would take quite a bell to call people from Dublin, Worthington, Powell, Lewis Center, and various parts of Columbus.

Some church bells were really no more than simple farm bells made larger. Their sound was more a clanging than anything else; yet, they did their jobs and could be heard over considerable distances. Bigger and more prosperous churches were able to afford larger and higher quality bells. These usually had a deep and resonant tone, but their purpose remained essentially the same—to call people to the sanctuary.

Church bells were also used to acknowledge special times in the church year like Easter when they would be rung vigorously and for extended periods. So it wasn't unusual at all that the bells in Cambridge, Massachusetts, would be heard on Christmas Day in 1863. They once again announced the coming of the Savior to the world. They were joyous in their proclamation and came from all directions over the town. Instead of being discordant, as you might imagine, they filled the sky with an interlacing of melody.

One of the townspeople who heard the bells on that particular Christmas Day was Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. As he sat at his desk he was moved by the jubilant sound. Yet, the ringing also stirred feelings and memories inside him of a far different kind. He was preoccupied by other concerns as he listened at the window. Some didn't fit in with such a glorious day.

Longfellow thought about a divided country, now two years into a bloody civil war. He thought about the great toll of life exacted at the Battle of Gettysburg just a few months before. He thought about his own son, a lieutenant in the Union Army, who had been seriously wounded on that field of conflict. These thoughts also came to mind as he heard those bells on Christmas morning.

Our Old Testament text today comes out of a similar time of uncertainty and trouble. The Hebrew people had seemingly lost their devotion and compassion. Their land had been devastated by the army of Sennacherib and most of the cities of Judah had been conquered and occupied.

Jerusalem alone was spared. Its survival was both unexpected and unmerited. Still, the city was only a shadow of its former days and its people just a remnant of its once powerful citizenry. Isaiah laments over the fall of the country, but says that it should not surprise anyone. Judah had fallen morally and spiritually long before others invaded and overcame the land.

Out of that troubled time Isaiah had been chosen to bring hope for a day of restoration and renewal. The prophet's words contain judgment, but also promise as we discover in our reading today.

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness--on them light has shined. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken....

“For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace... with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore.”

Here was a vision of great hope and one those folks sorely needed. In Isaiah's characterization they were “people who walked in darkness.” While it fit their situation particularly, “walking in darkness” might seem to describe all of us at times. We know from experience there are days when it feels as if everything about us is gloomy and dark. Life seems out of kilter. Sometimes those days can turn into weeks or even months.

A serious illness can lay us low and make us wonder if the day is even worth living. Chronic pain is another example, for it wears us down all the time. Losing a job or giving up a dream is also a form of walking in darkness. So is grieving a friend who moves away. Despondency can come from many sources and be felt in so many ways. Yes, all of us know at times what it is like to walk in darkness—and it doesn't feel good at all.

Maybe you even feel like that today. Christmas is here, but there's not much inside that wants to celebrate. Happiness is just too much of a stretch. Shiny packages can't seem to alter the dull edge of life. Glad songs can't seem to raise dampened spirits when you're struggling just to get by.

Our passage from Isaiah does indeed talk about people who walk in the dark, but it doesn't stop there. “Those who live in darkness.” says the prophet, “on them light has shined.” Something has happened, he says, that changes everything. It comes as if out of nowhere. It turns despair into hope, and the lost again find their way. The old moves aside and yesterday is replaced by today. And it most often happens unexpectedly.

One person wrote a note to another going through hard times. She ended by saying, “May you find comfort and courage and community until that time when you are again surprised by joy.” Not if, but **when**. It is a positive statement of hope. There is no ambiguity at all about it. It makes clear that it will happen, though when and where and how will be up to the future to determine.

Such a positive statement of hope was also contained in the angelic announcement of the birth of a child. “I am bringing you good news of great joy.” No ambiguity here, either, just good news of great joy for all the people.

What then is the key to finding joy? The key is simply being open to its possibility. The shepherds in the field did nothing to hasten the birth of the Messiah, but they were open to

receiving the news. We can't simply will to feel better when down, but a change for the better can occur when we're open to its possibility. It's a certain readiness for change.

Now to do this we must be willing to let the Spirit be at work in our lives. We can't direct it, but we can be responsive to its movement within us. With God all things are possible, even the healing of those deep wounds we carry with us. Often renewal comes at unexpected times and in unanticipated ways.

The words of Luke in today's Christmas text are so familiar that we may tend to miss their full impact. They relate a story about others, but how would it be to hear them addressed to us and personal. Consider if they said: "To you is born this day, in the City of David, a savior who is Christ the Lord." To you, [member name]; to you, [member name]; to you, [member name]; to you, [member name]; to you, [member name]; to you and for you a savior is born. Would that make a difference?

To you, Jesus can be born again today in your heart, and with his coming may be the healing that truly brings you out of the dusk into full light. It can happen any day. Remember, though, the key is letting yourself be open to its possibility.

On Christmas Day in 1863, Henry Longfellow heard the bells outside his study window. They seemed strangely out of place for all the pain and grief he was feeling. Then suddenly he began to hear a new song in their pealing. He heard a reassuring message coming out of their sounding. He picked up his pen and wrote the first draft of these words:

I heard the bells on Christmas day  
Their old familiar carols play,  
And wild and sweet the words repeat  
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

I thought how, as the day had come,  
The belfries of all Christendom  
Had rolled along th'unbroken song  
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

And in despair I bowed my head:  
"There is no peace on earth," I said,  
"For hate is strong and mocks the song  
Of peace on earth, good will to men."

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:  
"God is not dead, nor doth he sleep;  
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,  
With peace on earth, good will to men."

In troubled days Christ is our consolation as well as our celebration, and his love is stronger than whatever threatens to overtake us. That's the true Christmas, not limited to one day, but all year round. That's the continuing proclamation to you and to me: "Glory to God. Peace on earth. Good will to all."