

"Hope and Anticipation"

Isaiah 35:1-2, 5-10; Matthew 11:2-10

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

December 3, 2017 – 1st Sunday in Advent – Rev. Ronald Botts

[A meditation]

You can always tell when we're approaching Christmas because holiday decorations begin to appear in stores. Unfortunately, the merchandising season has expanded to the point that plastic reindeer often sit on the shelf next to the Halloween masks. Who really wants to buy Frosty the Snowman when temperatures hover in the 50's and 60's? After Christmas the stores can't get rid of seasonal items fast enough, but beforehand the selling becomes earlier every year.

Even when businesses keep the Christmas emphasis until after Thanksgiving there's still the question of appropriateness. Really, does it put you in the holiday mood to see a life-size Santa cut-out next to a Goodyear tire? Or how about a Budweiser display with three-dimensional elves touting the pleasure of beer? It's a bit of a stretch for advertising savvy Americans.

Commercial selling has largely steered clear of using religious figures in more direct merchandizing; yet, in an age of irreverence, I wonder how long that taboo might last. Do you suppose we might someday see John the Baptist in designer jeans? The magi could follow the brightest star to Burger King. And what a great product endorsement could you get from a Jesus-like figure enjoying the pleasure of wine? Each year we seem to straddle that fine religious line even more.

Not long ago, however, I went to a store that actually brought me a sense of joy. It gave me a feeling of the season, not because of its decorating, but because of the merchandise itself. In that plain room there were dozens of live poinsettia plants, from table size to that of a bush.

Besides the traditional red, there were pink flowers, white blossoms, and ones with variegated foliage. Stuck here and there were blooming Christmas cacti and potted mums in an array of colors. Wherever I looked I saw God's handiwork in a seemingly endless display of beauty. It made me feel good to be surrounded by all these colorful plants. It boosted my outlook for the whole day, and that remembrance continues to stay with me.

There's something, too, that lifts us as well in today's scripture from Isaiah. There's a joy and enthusiasm that spills over in the words of the prophet as he looks forward to Israel's return from exile. Can you sense it there?

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing...

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

then 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;
the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water...

And 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.

Perhaps it's hard for us to fully understand the hopefulness of these words, as the people did then. We've never known what it is to be exiled from our homeland and to live far away under the harsh rule of an oppressor. But you don't have to be a distance from home to have a sense of alienation.

Most of us have experienced those arid places in life where little seems to bloom. These are those arduous stretches where we have struggled with the death of a loved one or had a career that ended abruptly, by a profound disappointment we might have known with one of our children or suffered through a serious health problem, or any other difficulty. It's as if the solid ground beneath our feet has turned to sand and we sink in deeper with each step we take. This is exile, too. It is estrangement from life.

So perhaps even we can grasp a bit of the importance of this message of hope that came to a grieving people. The prophet's words opened a hopeful door to the future. It's like a person going through the challenge of chemotherapy who is then informed that the cancer is now in remission. Life returns almost miraculously when good news replaces despair. Instead of being dreaded, tomorrow now comes with anticipation.

Advent is the season of the year when we wait symbolically for the birth of Christ. We know, however, that the hope promised in this tiny baby was eventually fulfilled in the man who grew to be the Savior of the world. In him God has given us the way of true life. You see, Christmas is not something we do, but something we open ourselves to receive. It is not some little side gratification, but the place where the heart finds its genuine serenity and fulfillment.

Advent celebrates the newness of life to come, and the continuing good news is that we're all invited to join in. Wherever you encounter Christ in these next few weeks ahead, I hope that it will give you an awareness that life holds out promise... even if today's problems may not disappear magically. For we have the assurance that God's Spirit is with us. We are not alone and forsaken, but remembered and included. That's our **best** present at this time of year. That's really what the true Christmas is all about.