

This Christmas will be a very tough one for a family in one of our former churches. The husband, about forty, went to the doctor a few weeks ago, thinking that he had pulled a muscle in his chest. It turned out that he had a raging infection in his lungs. Immediately hospitalized, the man began receiving intensive treatment for a massive infection, which turned out to be drug-resistant. Nothing helped him. So they waited. The family, his wife and two small children, waited. The church prayed for him to get well, to be home. His condition worsened. He died a couple of weeks ago.

The brand-new widow had clung to hope for his recovery. In fact, in spite of discouraging remarks by the doctors, who knew how badly his lungs had been damaged and how serious a complication his diabetes was, everybody had thought that such a young man would pull through. But hopes were dashed, and this family was left devastated. Things became too dark, too scary, too mean.

In the reading from Isaiah, we heard, "Be strong! Do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." And what will "salvation" look like? The same scripture tells us: The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. Waters shall burst forth for the thirsty ground; and a highway, a path, will be there for folks to walk through what before had been hopeless wildernesses, impassable. And the ransomed of the Lord shall return; everlasting JOY shall be upon their heads (instead of the marks of mourning); they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

These images are marvelous ones, full of hope. But there are many times in our lives when these powerful promises just can't seem to touch the reality pressing down on our lives.

The woman has just lost her husband; last year she lost her mother. How can fellow Christians tell her, "The desert and the dry land will rejoice and blossom"? She doesn't see her God at all right now, except perhaps as one who has let her down. Where is the kingdom? WHEN are these things going to happen? Why is life still so dark, and hope such a challenging commodity? (pause)

"Are you the Messiah, or should we look for another?" As he sat in a dark prison, soon to die, John the Baptist sent messengers to Jesus with this question. "Are you the one, or was it all a mistake?"

In a way this inquiry is surprising, since John was the one who had baptized Jesus and at that time witnessed the Spirit of God descending like a dove with the proclamation about Jesus: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." John should have known if anyone could!

But we need to remember that John's situation was very dark as he sat there awaiting his death.

He had understood his life's purpose as that of preparing people for the coming of the Messiah. He had told them to repent and be baptized. He had been thrown into jail when he had told even powerful King Herod that Herod needed to clean up his act. John had been faithful to God, to the best of his ability. But there he was, in prison. And this Jesus, who had seemed so full of promise, wasn't doing things the way John had hoped.

Remember that the Jews in that day hoped for a Messiah who would bring in a whole new order: one who would cut down trees that weren't bearing fruit, and separate the wheat from the chaff. He would run the occupying Romans out of town and establish Israel as a powerful, independent nation again. Thus, John expected the Messiah's message to be one of doom, blasting the enemies and proclaiming God's destruction on whoever was unrepentant. Not only was Jesus not fulfilling these expectations, Jesus was even further disturbing John by his association with persons who were prostitutes and tax collectors, whom John himself condemned.

What a blessing that the Bible tells us that even John the Baptist had questions and doubts. Even John wasn't sure the Kingdom was really coming in in Jesus. Jesus sent John a reply which in effect told him that his hopes had not been misplaced: "The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." In other words, "John, I am fulfilling the promises of Isaiah... And you will be blessed if you can trust me."

The promise of this third Sunday of Advent is the promise that God is working to lead us home, to give us light in our very darkest places, even when we can't see it. If we are in prison, or in exile, or lost in the wilderness of our failures; if doubt feeds our fears and fans our angers, if we find that we cannot love or feel loved, God is yet working to give us hope. For it was to just such a world that the child was first given, to save us from our sins and open our hearts to a better way.

We don't always see it. Samuel Miller reminds us that, "We never see God directly. God is mediated to us by the very things that seem to deny him." A woman at the Sojourners Community in Washington, D.C., prayed before each food pantry and soup kitchen distribution, "O Lord, we know you will be passing through this line today. Make us gracious servants whether we recognize you or not."

As we look for Jesus during this holy season, I share a long-beloved poem by Edwin Markham that may be helpful. It is entitled, "How the Great Guest Came." This poem suggests how we may recognize the Christ of Christmas. It is a "story poem" about a simple cobbler in a European village many years ago. His faith was so palpable, and he was so beloved by all who knew him, that when he died they built a cathedral where his cobbler shop had been.

Before the cathedral in grandeur rose at Ingelburg where the Danube goes;  
Before the forest of silver spires went airily up in the clouds and fires;  
Before the oak had ready a beam, while yet the arch was stone and dream --  
There where the altar was later laid, Conrad, the cobbler, plied his trade.

It happened one day at the year's white end, two neighbors called on their old-time friend;

And they found the shop, so meager and mean, made gay with a hundred boughs of green.  
Conrad was stitching with face ashine, but suddenly stopped as he twitched a twine:  
“Old friends, good news! At dawn today, as the cocks were scaring the night away,  
The Lord appeared in a dream to me, and said, ‘I am coming your Guest to be!’  
So I have been busy with feet astir, strewing the floor with branches of fir.  
The wall is washed and the shelf is shined, and over the rafter the holly is twined.  
He comes today, and the table is spread with milk and honey and wheaten bread.”

His friends went home, and his face grew still as he watched for the shadow across the sill.  
He lived all the moments o'er and o'er, when the Lord should enter the lowly door--  
The knock, the call, the latch pulled up, the lighted face, the offered cup.  
He would wash the feet where the spikes had been, he would kiss the hands where the nails went in,  
Then at last would sit with Him and break the bread as the day grew dim.

While the cobbler mused there passed his pane a beggar drenched by the driving rain.  
He called him in from the stony street and gave him shoes for his bruised feet.  
The beggar went and there came an old woman (crone), her face with wrinkles of sorrow sown.  
A bundle of firewood (fagots) bowed her back, and she was spent with wrench and rack.  
He gave her his loaf and steadied her load as she took her way on the weary road.  
Then to his door came a little child, lost and afraid in the world so wild, in the big, dark world.  
Catching it up, he gave it the milk in the waiting cup,  
And led it home to its mother's arms, out of the reach of the world's alarms.

The day went down in the crimson west and with it the hope of the blessed Guest,  
And Conrad sighed as the world turned gray: “Why is it, Lord, that your feet delay?  
Did you forget that this was the day?” Then soft in the silence a Voice he heard:

“Lift up your heart, Conrad, for I kept my word.  
Three times I came to your friendly door;  
Three times was my shadow on your floor.  
I was the beggar with bruised feet;  
I was the woman you gave to eat;  
I was the child on the homeless street!”

I hear a Voice saying: "If you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me". (Matt. 25:45)  
Can you hear that Voice? It is the Christ of Christmas! (End of poem)

John the Baptist and Jesus would tell us today: Repent! Turn to God and put your trust in and  
your burdens on God, for God's kingdom is already at hand. In God's kingdom, joy will come---  
joy even in the midst of hopelessness, anxiety and hunger. God's presence gives light where  
there is sorrow and grief. Signs of reconciliation and peace water a land parched by bitterness  
and hatred. Valleys are made low, rough places level. And God will be discovered at work in  
the midst of the people. And as young Mary said when she heard from the angel that she would  
have a Child who would be the Son of God, we may choose to say, “Let it be so!”

The seven year-old boy who just his father can no longer directly receive his daddy's love and

nurturing. But by the grace of God, he *MAY* be able to experience the love of others in new ways, as Christmas presents are donated and meals are brought, and as his pastor sits with him and listens to his questions and the pain of what he understands. The church family must be God's kingdom for this boy right now, and for his mother and baby sister, and do what they can to show them that, in spite of their huge loss and painful darkness, God still loves them.

Give God room to work. And let God show you that a dark and damaged world is a big room for US to become part of God's work.

We must be patient; we must pray for the vision which is larger than the sum of the pieces we can define in life. We are invited to make room for God in new ways in our lives, and to let all of life be the room in which we work to make God's love visible for others.

God's Kingdom is not just a "someday," but a *NOW* for us, as we open our eyes to the pain and brokenness of this world and pray for the vision larger than the sum pieces we can define in life. We are invited the make room for God in new ways in our lives, and to let all of life be the room in which we work to make God's love visible for others. May it be so, according to God's will! Amen.