

Everything Sad Coming Untrue
Part Five: The Birth of Hope
Isaiah 35.3-4
Christmas Eve Reflections

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Christmas Vacation

The holidays are like life in miniature, aren't they? All the joys and all the disappointments of life are wrapped up and handed to us in a few short days.

I was thinking about that as our extended family was sitting around the table this week talking about what the past year has been like and what the coming year is likely to hold.

Around our table we experienced the great joy of being all together and the sting of Molly and Dylan being unable to be with us. Just before they left to come home they had a COVID test and had, shall we say, a very "positive" experience.

And while we experienced the fun of having our grandkids, Shepherd and Rosie, under our roof, we missed having their great grandmother Margie with us too, as she took a road trip to be with her sons over the holidays.

We rejoiced together with Corrie and John Matthew as they anticipate their upcoming wedding in April, but we also shared with John Matthew in the pain of his mom's advancing cancer, and the concern that she may not live till the wedding.

Joy, sadness, frustration, loss, disappointment – all woven together.

I'm sure every one of you could describe a similar mix of good and hard over these holidays.

For all of us, Christmas time is a cross section of life.

We may get presents we love, or we may have to do a whole bunch of returns.

We may find ourselves alone and wishing to be with others, or with others and wishing for some time on our own.

We may see some relatives we love but there are others who will be missing around our table.

We have time off from school but the start of second semester hangs over our heads even as we try to relax.

And then on top of all of that is the weary burden of COVID and how it continues to leave its dirty fingerprints on every single part of life through things such as supply chain issues, mask requirements, delivery disruptions, and construction delays.

In preparation for tonight's message I read a number of different articles about the emotional and mental health of our nation as a result of COVID, and we're struggling.

A Washington Post article describes that cumulative weariness from COVID, and how it has hit younger adults in disproportionate numbers with stress, anxiety, depression, isolation, suicidal thoughts.

An article in the New York Times reported that COVID has disrupted even normal ways of relating, so much so that social anxiety is on the rise across the board, especially among younger adults, because of the added pressures of social media, causing increases in isolation and also in substance abuse, as people try to deal with the pressure to meet the expectations of others, and are afraid of failure and rejection.

Related to that, according to a US New and World Report article, the number of people seeking treatment for anxiety and depression has soared during COVID, so much so that some people are calling this not just a wave of concerns related to emotional wellbeing, but a mental health tsunami. Sleep difficulties, substance abuse, and other addictive disorders are on the rise as well.

What part of our culture is untouched by this virus that keeps multiplying and spreading its way around the globe?

I'm sure you've heard of "long term" or "long haul" COVID. Well, I thought of another virus-related syndrome the medical community should probably identify.

It is called "short-fuse COVID." Things were hard enough last Christmas. It seems like a year later there is all the same burden of grief, and frustration and disappointment, but with a whole new layer of impatience and anger.

Over the past few weeks, with every person I've interacted with out in the community, I've made a point to ask how they are doing and how people are treating them, and virtually without exception store clerks and post office workers and Fed Ex drivers and hospital staff have described how stressed and impatient and grumpy people are.

Last week I said to someone it's like there's a ping pong table set up in front of us and it's covered with mouse traps that are all set, and our words are like ping pong balls. You say something innocuous and – snap, snap, snap.

Another variation could be called “long haul COVID culture.” It isn’t just individuals who are depressed and weary and anxious and stressed – it’s our whole society.

One writer described what he sees as the “collective weariness” of our world. What a great way to put it.

It sounds a lot like the world Isaiah was speaking to when he spoke God’s promise eight hundred years before Jesus was born. In Isaiah 35 he describes a weary world that desperately needs to be shored up and strengthened.

Isaiah 35.3-4

Strengthen the feeble hands,
steady the knees that give way;
say to those with fearful hearts,
“Be strong, do not fear;
your God will come.”

It is a world with feeble hands, with knees that are about to give way, with fretful and fearful hearts. And to this weary world of ours God made this promise.

“Your God will come.”

Fast forward eight hundred years to a small farming village outside Jerusalem, where an amazing birth announcement was made.

Luke 2.10-14

¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “*Do not be afraid*. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

The Christmas Event

If Christmas vacation is life in miniature, then what we celebrate at Christmas is the Christian faith in miniature.

Think about what makes Christmas different from other things we celebrate, days like President’s Day, and Memorial Day, and the Fourth of July, – those are days that mark someone who lived or something that happened a long time ago.

But when we celebrate Christmas, we celebrate not just a past event but a *present reality*. Emmanuel, God *is* with us. When Jesus was born, God stepped into our world, and he never left.

Yes he died, but he rose again three days later. And yes, he ascended to heaven, but he sent his Spirit to take up residence in the hearts of each of us who are his followers.

Christmas is the declaration that God has come to us. He came and made his residence in our midst.

Christmas is Jesus coming to our world. Coming to our land. Coming to our community. Coming to our neighborhood. Coming to our street. Coming to our house. Coming to our heart. And every day he comes to us again, to reveal God's presence, to show God's love, to pour out on us God's hope and strength.

Just as Isaiah promised he would.

Isaiah 35.3-4

Strengthen the feeble hands,
steady the knees that give way;
say to those with fearful hearts,
"Be strong, do not fear;
your God will come."

When we seek to bear the weight of life on our own, life is a heavy burden.

Uncertainty in front of me.
Pressures and stress squeezing in from either side of me.
The weight of loss pressing down from on top of me.
Fears before me tripping me up.
Anger rising up within me.
The consequences of my choices and actions in my wake.

But when we let Jesus bear the weight of this life's burdens, when we let him carry the weight of our sin's consequences and this world's brokenness, we find rest and peace.

Matthew 11.28

Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

At Christmas, our God comes to us, and says, "Come to me, and I will give you rest."

Listen to this ancient prayer that some think traces all the way back to St Patrick:

Christ with me,
Christ before me,

Christ behind me,
 Christ in me,
 Christ beneath me,
 Christ above me,
 Christ on my right,
 Christ on my left,
 Christ when I lie down,
 Christ when I sit down,
 Christ when I arise . . .

Jordan Baize lived on a thirteen acre lot in Bremen, Kentucky, with his nine year old son Max and his 5 year old daughter Annie Grace. When the derecho winds and tornadoes hit on December 15, he invited his ex-wife and her husband to come over and shelter with them in his basement. When they emerged after the storm, his roof was gone and a wall had collapsed.

The next day his family came over to help him salvage what was left. His sister was sifting through clothes in the bedroom closet when she heard music. It was her brother playing the piano. She came around the corner and began to record him.

(See Jordan Baize video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GdlHQNss-8Y>)

Jordan was playing a song called, "There's Something About That Name." He said the song was running through his head during the storm and after.

One of the lines says, "Kings and kingdoms will all pass away, but there's something about that name." Jordan said, "My little 13-acre kingdom had been destroyed. But still at the center of it all, Christ is steady and constant."

How has that been your experience? How has God through Christ

- strengthened your feeble hands?
- steadied your knees so they don't give way?
- whispered to your fearful heart: "Be strong. Do not be afraid. Your God will come"?

We want to give you the opportunity now to describe to one another in a sentence or two how God has come to you in the past year.

How has God come to you and met you in the challenges and difficulties of the past year? How has Jesus been Emmanuel - God-with-us? Come share with us in a few sentences how He has come to you.

Sharing