

O Children of the Forest Free

Third in Advent Sermon Series
The Radical Hope of the Carols

from the pulpit of
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Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Isaiah 35:1-10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus ²it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God. ³Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. ⁴Say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.”

⁵Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; ⁶then 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; ⁷the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. ⁸A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. ⁹No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. ¹⁰And 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.

Matthew 11:2-11

²When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" ⁴Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the 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. ⁶And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

⁷As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. ⁹What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' ¹¹Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Bill Goettler, of Yale Divinity School, has said that the challenge of encountering the familiar Advent readings is like reconnecting with old friends. We have the delightful ability to pick up where we left off, to remember and enjoy those common bits and pieces of our shared history. But when we do get together with longtime friends, from whom we may have been distanced for a while, we also recognize that we have changed since we were last together.

“Each passing year changes us,” he writes, “each birth, every death, the shifting political contexts in which we live, the relationships that are new to us and those that fall away.” While the old stories that we share with friends continue to be utterly dependable, the ways that we change over time matters at least as much.

Goettler then makes connection to this season in the church year, saying: “There is such power, such wonder, such dependability in the ways that we have heard these familiar Christmas stories about “Immanuel, God with us” for our whole lives... but like the oldest of friends, these too must live in the present moment.” Some years our hopes rise, and we feel certain that God’s ways are unfolding before us in the midst of creation’s wonder. And then there are the seasons when despots rule and sojourners find no welcome, when we grieve the very human state in which we find ourselves.” He concludes: “So – like old friends – the familiar Christmas readings deserve to be heard, and explored, and revealed again, in the midst of the present day.”¹

Goettler’s observation is part of what led me to pair some of the Christmas carols with our Advent readings year so that we could consider the radical hope they proclaim with fresh insight for our present day. On the first Sunday of Advent we looked at how *Joy to the World* is a carol that shares hope for the future with the apocalyptic texts about the end of time – that the day is coming when the whole cosmos will be redeemed by the Living God. Last week we considered how the Incarnation of God in Jesus – fully

¹ Bill Goettler, *Journal for Preachers*, “Old Friends: The Advent Texts,” Advent 2019.

human, fully divine – is a mystery that defies explanation and is best proclaimed in poetry and music as we sang “Of the Father’s Love Begotten.” Today, we are pairing the oldest – uniquely North American – Christmas carol with two familiar Advent readings, with the hope that these old friends may speak the gospel truth to us in new ways.

Now, I gather that many of you do not know *‘Twas In the Moon of Wintertime* because the native Huron people for whom it was first written – were conquered by the Iroquois, their remnant scattered by European colonists. The story of this beautiful hymn is also the story of how Jesus’ commandment to “Go make disciples of all nations, baptizing them, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you...” was far too often taken up with violence. We all know the history of Christianity spreading across the globe is also a history of cruelty, oppression, and enslavement the precious children of God being abused, dehumanized, and even killed. This old Native American hymn the Huron people may help redeem some of that tragic past for the living of our days.

For the Christmas story brings hope and joy, but it also brings to mind images of a broken world – a family displaced by a government census, giving birth in an animals’ stable, and then being forced to flee to Egypt to protect the life of that infant from the cruel schemes of a tyrant. The United Nations currently estimates that over seventy million people in the world are refugees having been “forcibly displaced” from their homes. They are at our southern border, trying to escape violence and extreme poverty. They are spread across the continent of Africa and in areas of Southeast Asia where climate change is making huge tracts of land uninhabitable. They are fleeing unbearable oppression and violence across the Middle East. They are youth on our city streets who have aged out of foster care and have no place to call home.

Both today’s scripture readings and this old Huron Christmas carol speak to current realities. Let me take each in turn. Every year, both Isaiah and John the Baptist come alive from the pages of scripture during Advent with visions of a future bright with hope and possibility. They are both prophets. Rabbi Abraham Heschel

noted that the real gift of the prophets was their ability to see. He wrote: the prophets “know what they see rather than simply seeing what they already know.”² They call us to turn from our history of failures and turn to God’s more hopeful future. Isaiah sees the whole creation making room for the glory of the Lord. Isaiah sees humankind transformed – the blind will see, the deaf will hear, the speechless will sing for joy. Isaiah sees those seventy million people the United Nations numbers as displaced today as free to return home singing: *everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*

That is the song God’s people will someday sing at our southern border, across the continent of Africa, in the wilderness places of the Middle East, on our city streets. *They shall obtain joy and gladness.*

Then we hear echoes of Isaiah’s words on the lips of Jesus when John the Baptist inquires if Jesus really is the Messiah: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” John is in prison when he asks that question; he has been arrested and jailed as a political enemy of King Herod. He is wondering if Jesus is carrying on his ministry, calling people’s attention to unjust political and social structures, confronting people in power, and inviting people to see the world God envisions – where those on the bottom rung become the most highly valued, and the weakest members of society given the place of prominence.

Jesus answers John’s question by reaching back into the prophecy of Isaiah: *the blind receive their sight; the lame walk; lepers are cleansed; the deaf hear; and the poor have good news brought to them.* At the far end of the question, “Are you the one?” Jesus said, “Go and tell John... that is where I can be found.” Jesus will be found, doing the work of God, in the hard places, among those who are in need of the healing, restorative, life-giving power of God. The message of the Christian faith was never meant to be spread under the threat of a sword, or at the far end of a colonial

² Abraham Heshcel, *The Prophets*, p. 24.

rifle. The message of the Christian faith was never meant to be spread by oppression or enslavement or abuse. But rather by the values of God's intentions for all of humankind – access to abundant life for all people, a creation to sustain life for all people, justice and dignity for all people. That is the way to spread the gospel.

Back in the early-1600's Father Jean de Bre'beuf was a Jesuit priest who traveled from his native France to work as a missionary among the Huron people in what is now northeastern Canada. Despite his zeal for the Christian faith he was sensitive to the people with whom he lived. So he honored what they already knew about who God is, and God's love for the creation, when he wrote about the Christmas story in language the Hurons understood.

*'Twas in the moon of wintertime,
when all the birds had fled
That mighty Gitchi Manitou
sent angel choirs instead.
Before their light the stars grew dim
and wondering hunters heard the hymn:
Jesus your King is born.*

Now, the editors of our new hymnal took out the Algonquian name for God – *Gitchi Manitou* – used by the Huron, Cree, Blackfoot, Cheyenne and many other native tribes – and inserted the Great Spirit Lord instead. But Father Jean's original carol preserved the Huron name for God in unfolding the Christmas story, and his reverence for their way of life is brought to the birth narrative he tells.

The shepherds directed by angels to find the babe in swaddling clothes become hunters who find him wrapped in rabbit fur: *Within a lodge of broken bark the tender babe was found. A ragged robe of rabbit skin enwrapped his beauty round.* The Magi who bring the baby gold and myrrh become chiefs of the tribes offering skins and fur to keep him warm in that cold Canadian winter: *The chiefs from far before him knelt with gifts of fox beaver pelt.*

This oldest North American Christmas carol may be new to us, but its message tells the old familiar story in ways relevant to our world today. Where do we find the Christ child? How do we tell the story of his birth in our world? He comes to us in a world beset by war and injustice, in places of poverty and inequity and environmental degradation. He comes into our lives made deaf by the din of political rancor where it is hard to unstop our ears in order to hear the chorus of angels; where it is not easy to open our eyes blind to the pain and suffering of our world in desperate need of God's vision of redemption. In the culminating verse we are invited as "*Children of the forest free... to kneel before the radiant boy who brings us beauty, peace and joy.*"

'Twas in the Moon of Wintertime was sung first in 1641 and each Christmas thereafter for about a decade. Then Iroquois invaded Huronia and drove out the Hurons, and killed Father Jean. A full century later another Jesuit priest heard the carol preserved by the displaced Huron people, wrote down the words, translated it into French and it has been sung ever since in Quebec. In the last century a Canadian poet and historian wrote the English interpretation, trying to retain the Native American flavor which shares the Christmas story love and kindness, honoring the native people as it did from its inception. ³

Isaiah says the whole creation will be redeemed, and when John the Baptist – having doubts toward the end of his life while in prison asked, "Are you the one?" I like to imagine that Jesus might have said, on behalf of oppressed and marginalized people everywhere, and even for us ourselves:

*"O children of the forest free,
the angel song is true
the holy child of earth and heaven
is born today for you."*

Amen.

³ *Presbyterian Hymnal Companion*, p. 220; etymologyofhymns.blogspot.com; general internet searches.