

Sermon Advent IV December 19, 2010

This sermon was adapted from one presented by the Rev. Diane Hendricks, at the Little Falls Presbyterian Church in Arlington, VA December 16, 2001

Valerie singing: It's the most wonderful time of the year! With the kids jingle belling, and everyone telling you, "be of good cheer," It's the most wonderful time of the year.

Ron (sound irritating, going out into the congregation):

Only it's not.

Not for everyone.

Not when there is an empty chair at the table.

Not when your body is ravaged with illness.

Not when the depression is too much to bear.

Not without her voice joining yours on the Christmas carols.

Not when you feel all alone even in a crowd.

Not when you are not sure you can even afford the rent or mortgage, let alone the presents.

Not when they are trying their best to get the best of you.

Not when another Christmas party means he will come home drunk again.

It's the most wonderful time of the year? No, it's not.

And trying to smile and say Merry Christmas is more than difficult. It's pretty near impossible.

C.S. Lewis once wrote: "No one ever told me that grief felt so much like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning..."

Valerie singing: It's the hap-happiest season of all, with those holiday greetings and great happy meetings, when friends come to call, it's the hap-happiest season of all.

Ron (*sound grieving, slow down, take time*)

Only it's not.

Not after he has died.

Not after the doctor gave you the news.

Not after they told you they would be downsizing.
Not after the tsunami, the hurricanes, the earthquake
Not after 911, when there is so much violence and destruction in the world.

In truth, it has never been the most wonderful time of the year. Certainly not in the days surrounding that first Christmas so long ago. The story of the birth of Jesus is not to be told with a jolly voice and a merry ho-ho-ho.

It is the story of a teenage girl, pregnant with a child that is not her husband's.
It is the story of a child born in a dirty animal stall.
It is the story of a family of refugees who had to flee their homeland so that their child would not be killed.
It is the story of one sent into the world in peace who was condemned to death.
It is the story of a light sent to shine in the darkness, which the world snuffed out.
It is the story of God's never-ending, self-giving mercy which was rejected and condemned.

In the great work "Messiah," Handel quotes the prophet Isaiah, proclaiming that Jesus was "despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." One great theologian reminds us that we cannot come to the manger without acknowledging that it lies in the shadow of the cross.

Valerie singing: They'll be parties for hosting, marshmallows for toasting and caroling out in the snow, they'll be scary ghost stories and tales of the glories of Christmases long, long ago. It's the most wonderful time of the year.

Ron: (*proclaiming*)

Yes! it is:

If we forget about the tinsel and the trees.

Yes, it is, if we forget about the holly jolly tidings.

Yes, it is, if we forget about the presents and the ornaments and the trappings.

And remember. (*storytelling style*)

Remember the story.

God exalted Mary, who was alone and afraid among woman.

God revealed to Joseph, who felt disgraced, his plan to save the world.

Though the world was dark, God sent the light of life to shine.

Though the lowly were imprisoned, Jesus set them free!.

Though the blind wandered aimlessly, Christ gave them eyes to see.

Though the lame had been rejected, through the Holy One they were made to leap and dance.

Though the deaf were confined to the silence, the song of life unstopped their ears.

Though the sorrowful grieve, God wipes away our tears.

Though we were alone, in Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God is with us.

Though the human race rejects God, the Almighty embraces us.

Though the world crucified Christ, God would not allow that to be the last word, and gave us the sure hope of the resurrection.

Val: It's the most wonderful time of the year. There'll be much mistletoeing and hearts will be glowing, when loved ones are near. It's the most wonderful time of the year.

Ron (*sarcastically*): It is the most wonderful time of the year, not because we have to be cheery and happy and merry.

But because we don't.

We can have heavy spirits and shattered dreams. Broken hearts and deep wounds.

(*Proclamation*) And still God comes to be with us

To comfort us.

To redeem us.

To save us.

To restore us.

To empower us.

To strengthen us.

To grant us peace.

To be raised for us.

To hold us in the communion of saints with those whom you have loved and lost.

(slowly/with emphasis) To store our tears in his bottle.

To offer us eternal life.

It is the most wonderful time of the year. For Christ is born, Love has come; God is with us. With thankful hearts, let us ponder our Savior's birth in Bethlehem, remembering his promises, that in the fulfillment of time, God will live among us and wipe every tear from our eyes.

At the end of the prayers of the people we will sing "O Come, O Come Emanuel," we invite those of you whose hearts are burdened to come forward and light a candle on the altar. If you are grieving over someone, light a candle in remembrance of them. If you are slowed down with burdens, turn them over to God. After lighting a candle, if you would like a blessing you can stop at the front of the steps to be anointed with holy oil, before returning to your seat.