

Advent Sermon Series: Finding Bethlehem in the Midst of Bedlam

Sermon: "Imprisoned or Free?"

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6; Galatians 5:1, 13-24

Salem United Methodist Church; December 6, 2015

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During this Advent season we are exploring how Bethlehem, or the peace and hope that comes with Christmas can break through our world of bedlam. Today we will look at whether we allow this bedlam to imprison us or do we allow the Christ Child to free us?

There is a Christmas song that begins with, "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 happiest season of all." And then tragedy strikes and we say, "Why does this have to happen at Christmas? Or how will we get through Christmas?" For some reason we have created this myth that Christmas is to be perfect with no sadness and no weeping. We want to create "perfect" moments filled with joy and merriment. After all, we say, "Merry Christmas." Have we become imprisoned by our self-created Christmas traditions that produce a false peace, a false hope, a false joy, and yes, even a false love? So why Christmas? Why the holiday season?

And then we have the Advent readings of John the Baptist crying, "Prepare the way of the Lord," and the Malachi passage stating to us that God is going to scrub us clean or refine us like gold and silver. What's up with these verses? These are not images of that project "parties for hosting, marshmallows for toasting, and caroling out in the snow." However, these are images that point to the "why" of Christmas. Here's a newsflash! We are an imperfect people who live in an imperfect world. In fact we live in a world in which evil and death exist. Pain, suffering, and grief are realities. In addition, we are a people who focus on ourselves and in the process we hurt others. None of this is new "news." Each generation has to discover this on our own or so it seems, as though no one else ever has experienced these before. We seem to have to experience pain and suffering. We seem to have to experience loss for ourselves. We seem to have to confront our own fears and terrors. We seem to have to fight our own wars. We seem to have to face the harm we do to others. We seem to have to face our own sins. However, in the midst of all this, there is Someone who wants to offer us hope. That same Someone has offered the same hope since before the time of Malachi. That same Someone repeats this "news" about hope again through John the Baptist. That same Someone then comes to live among us to personally show us this hope. And do we ever need this hope and we need to know what this hope is all about. This hope is a freedom that can break open the chained doors of our lives. We need to be reminded again and again not just at Christmas, but every day that we can have this freedom that can free us from pain, suffering, fear, terror, wars, harm, and sin. This is the "why" of Christmas. God came as a baby to be that hope. Babies are hope, aren't they? When we hold a baby no matter what is happening around us, we sense a hope in tomorrow, a hope that life goes on. Jesus as God's Son came as a human baby who had to depend on other humans to feed and care for him, so he could embody hope or this freedom which we call salvation. This is the "why" of Christmas.

The baby Jesus came to free us of our selfishness, our hate, our pain, our suffering. The baby Jesus came to show and tell us that a perfect world can happen here. Jesus as an adult called it the Kingdom of God which can exist on earth as it does in heaven. Jesus as an adult created that heaven on earth through his teachings and his miracles. Jesus came to free us so we could truly live in hope for today and a greater hope for tomorrow. Jesus came so this freedom could transform us to live as though the Kingdom of God is here and now. This is the "why" of Christmas. The Apostle Paul

wrote, "Christ has set us free for freedom." Do not confuse this freedom with our national freedoms. Freedom in Christ is something completely different. With the freedom we receive from Christ, even those with life sentences in prison can experience the freedom Christ offers us. And there are those who live outside our jails who live imprisoned lives. We can be imprisoned by our selfishness, our hate, and our unconcern. Jesus comes to us and says, "I've broken the locks of your prison. I've thrown away the keys. Come out of your self-made prisons and live, really live. Come and live a life of love, a life of caring and serving each other. Christ breaks the locks on our prison doors, but we have to decide to walk out the door. Broken locks and open doors are one image of what salvation is. The prophet Malachi used two other images-harsher images, I think. He uses the image of soap scrubbing us clean or a refining gold and silver with fire. A refiner's fire is an extremely hot fire used to melt gold and silver so it can be shaped into whatever the desires of the gold or silversmith. So pick your image of how God saves us through Jesus Christ.

St. Francis of Assisi who lived in Italy in the 13th century used even different imagery. He wrote a prayer asking the Lord to set him free from selfishness so he could serve. This prayer can be found on page 481 in the hymnal. The song is on page 2171 in *The Faith We Sing*.

"Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
To be consoled as to console,
To be understood as to understand,
To be loved as to love;
For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
It is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Jesus came to make our crooked paths straight, to fill the valleys of our lives with his peace, to level the mountains that seem impossible to climb with his hope, and to smooth the rough places with his love. This is our salvation. Emmanuel, God is with us, changing our hearts and lives, forgiving us so we can be free to love and serve. When we realize this then no pain, or suffering, or loss, or fear, or terror, or evil, or death can destroy our hope, our peace, and our joy. For Christ has set us free to live. This doesn't mean that we won't feel sadness or grieve. What this means is, we can wrap presents, put lights in our windows, display our manger scenes and Santa Clauses, sing our Christmas carols, and know that not only during this season, but every day, is the most wonderful time of the year because Jesus is our Hope.

Reflection Questions: What, if anything, imprisons you? Can you sense that Christ has already set you free? Can you walk through the door? Who is waiting on the other side of that door to walk with you?

Resources: *Finding Bethlehem in the Midst of Bedlam* by James Moore

