

Blue Christmas

Sterling UMC
December 6, 2009
Isaiah 40:1-11

Just for the fun of it, we are beginning each of our Advent messages by recalling a Christmas song. Some of these songs are secular, some are sacred. Our song for this Sunday is several decades old. It was first sung by a young rock-and-roller named Elvis Presley. I don't know if you remember him or not. Of course Elvis sang, "I'll have a blue, blue, blue, blue Christmas without you." I hope I put in a sufficient number of "blue, blues," in case there is a die hard Elvis fan in the room. However, I felt "Blue Christmas" would fit in with Isaiah 40 which begins, "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God." That's a great theme for the second Sunday in Advent. Comfort. For you see though some people sing, "It's the most wonderful time of the year! With the kids jingle belling, and everyone telling you, "be of good cheer," not everyone is full of cheer at Christmas.

There is another popular song I could have chosen for this Sunday rather than "Blue Christmas." It is a real tear-jerker titled, "Please Daddy (Don't Get Drunk This Christmas)." That one didn't reach the popularity of "Blue Christmas." I'll bet most of you can't guess who first sang this Christmas classic? The late, great folk singer, John Denver. Clean-cut and wholesome, "Rocky Mountain High," John Denver. Singing from the point of view of an eight-year-old, Denver reminisces in the song about a Christmas when Daddy drank too much and fell down underneath the Christmas tree, much to Mommy's dismay. He asks Daddy to show some restraint this year because he doesn't "want to see my Momma cry." Denver didn't sell many records with this tune, but for some people this sentimental song will be all-too-relevant during this Advent/Christmas season. It reminds us that holiday memories aren't necessarily happy in many families. Blue Christmas.

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God," writes Isaiah. "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. A voice of one calling: 'In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.'"

My friend, here is God's word for your life right now. If you are in pain this Advent season, God is here to comfort you. Perhaps you are in grief over the loss of a loved one. Perhaps this was not the kind of year financially you had expected. It could be the economy. We live in a prosperous country, but not everyone shares equally in it, and that can be particularly painful this time of year. It's tough not to be able to do for our children all the things we would like to do. Of course, some people can't even put food on the table. Or perhaps you received a bad medical prognosis for yourself or someone

in your family. Perhaps your marriage is coming apart. What an awful season to deal with family problems. Whatever your heartbreak this day, God wants to offer you His comfort.

Advent says, first of all, that God cares about a broken world. Isaiah was speaking to a broken nation. Much of the nation of Israel had been carried away into exile. They longed to return to their home land. And Isaiah assures them that God has not forgotten them nor forsaken them. Their suffering is almost over. God will build a vast highway over which they can travel through the wilderness from Babylon back to their home, the Promised Land. In the New Testament John the Baptist cries that soon God will build an even more important highway linking humanity and God. The message is the same. God cares about a broken world. God cares about broken people.

That's why we call the story of Jesus "Good News." God cares about a broken world. God cares about broken people. That's what Advent and Christmas are all about. "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God."

Jesus came into our world to identify with the world's suffering. That's the whole point of the Advent season. Advent comes from the Latin. It means "to come." Jesus came into our world that he might walk in our shoes.

Stephen Arterburn in his book *Flashpoints* tells about a remarkable young woman named Pattie Moore. When Pattie was seventeen years old, she was a promising student at the Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, New York. One day a bus she was riding on stopped for a traffic light at a busy intersection. An old man on the sidewalk caught Moore's attention. He was disheveled, but clean and he carried two loaded shopping bags, one under each arm. He moved slowly. Each step seemed to be a challenge for him. This was an awakening for Pattie Moore. It suddenly occurred to her that older people have special needs, special difficulties. This became a major motivator in her life.

After graduation Pattie moved to New York City and accepted a job with a prestigious industrial design firm where she began to design products with older people in mind. With each assignment she would ask herself, could my grandfather whom Pattie loved greatly manage this with his aging eyes and hands?

Then one day Pattie decided to go even further. With the help of a friend who was a makeup artist for NBC, Pattie decided to spend several months disguised as an old woman. She wanted to discover for herself how America treated the elderly. Her friend fitted pieces of latex to Pattie's face to instantly age her. She wrapped her legs with Ace bandages; then she wore support stockings over those bandages to bind her movements. She put wax in her ears to make hearing more difficult and drops of baby oil in her eyes to cloud her vision. She wrapped adhesive tape around her fingers to simulate arthritis and wore gloves over the tape. And Pattie Moore discovered much to her dismay how the world sometimes treats the elderly. She reports that she was ignored, shoved, cheated, ostracized, and even mugged. "When I was in character,"

she said afterwards, “if I got a smile or a hello from a passerby, I felt like I’d received a hug from God himself.”

Her experiment changed forever her thinking about the needs of the elderly. It also influenced the thinking of industrial designers, politicians, and others who learned about Pattie’s work.

The only way Pattie Moore could learn about the needs of the elderly was to experience for herself what it was to be elderly. Here is what is so majestic about the coming of Christ. God came to us as a tiny baby not as a grown man or woman, but as a tiny babe. Other religions have gods that come to earth, but only the Christian faith speaks of a God who emptied Himself completely and went through the entire human experience. God knows the challenges we face. God knows the pain of being human. The highway that God constructed between heaven and earth was a two-way road. God came down to us so that we might go up to Him. This is so important.

God has walked in your shoes. God knows your pain. This is the Gospel. This is the Good News. God cares about a broken world. Jesus came into our world to identify with the world’s suffering.

And this brings us to the last thing to be said: The manger of Bethlehem is as much a part of Christian faith as the cross of Calvary. I love the way Isaiah puts it in verse nine: “You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’”

Here is your God, my friend, a helpless babe in the manger of Bethlehem.
Here is your God, 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.

I don’t know about shouting, like Isaiah prescribes, but it reminds me of the little Gospel spiritual, “Amen,” in which the preacher tells the story of Jesus while the congregation sings, “Amen, Amen.” This is who God is. In the words of Isaiah, “He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.” Here is our God.

Now I don't know, but maybe for you this year it is a Blue Christmas. I don't know. But what I do know is this; in the midst of your Blue Christmas, it really 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. 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 offer us eternal life.

For Christ is born, Love has come; God is with us. That's what these elements remind us of. So as we come forward to this altar with thankful hearts, let us remember that God cares about a broken world. Jesus came into the world to identify with our suffering. The manger of Bethlehem is just as important to our faith as the cross of Calvary. Look in the manger of Bethlehem whatever your need may be. Here is your God.