

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
Third Sunday of Advent  
December 11, 2005

**Sowing Seeds of Joy  
in the Valley of Affliction  
Isaiah 61: 1-4, 10-11; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24**

Today's sermon will probably only speak to certain people.  
If life is going pretty well for you right now,  
if you're living a fairly pain-free, idyllic existence  
then you may let your mind wander freely  
for the next 20 minutes or so.

Today's scripture and sermon are really more for those who,  
in this season of joy, find themselves afflicted.  
If you are brokenhearted,  
or bound in chains of one sort or another,  
imprisoned in your circumstances,  
grieving the loss of love, or freedom, or health,  
letting go of dreams, or happy endings,  
finding that "the end is not as fun as the start" (Bono).  
Then this sermon is an attempt to speak to you.

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Yesterday morning, Mary Ellen, the kids and I,  
joined with the throng of excited families pouring into theaters  
to see *Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*,  
the first book of C. S. Lewis's beloved Narnia Chronicles.  
The story begins as the 4 Pevensie children walk through a  
magical wardrobe, into strange and beautiful world.  
But Narnia has been held under the spell of the White Witch,  
who has subjected this world to a 100-year winter.  
Always winter, and never Christmas.  
Can you imagine?

But the children meet Mr. & Mrs. Beavers who have good news to tell.  
They are seeing signs that Aslan is on the move.  
Aslan, the great Lion, creator of Narnia and Christ-figure in Lewis' tale,  
is the only one who can set Narnia free from the evil enchantment  
of the Witch.  
As the children begin their journey to meet Aslan,

they, too, begin to see the signs of his coming.  
They are met by Father Christmas who bears witness to Aslan's coming.  
They begin to hear a strange noise,  
for the first time since they've arrived in Narnia,  
they hear the sound of running water,  
a sign that warmth is spreading across the land.  
Then, little shoots begin to emerge from the snow,  
and flowers begin to bloom.  
And they themselves are a sign, 2 Sons of Adam and 2 Daughters of Eve,  
have arrived in Narnia to take part in Aslan's plan  
as foretold by the ancient prophecy.  
These signs are only the beginning of what is to come;  
so with wonderment, with fear and trembling,  
but with the seeds of joy now planted within them,  
they continue on their dangerous quest  
to meet the great Lion.

I won't tell you any more, because you really need to see the movie  
(and, of course, read the book!)

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The prophet Isaiah shows up this morning like Father Christmas in Narnia,  
and the Psalmist joins in the chorus, announcing that God is on the move,  
to bring freedom to those held captive  
under the dark enchantment of evil,  
to give sight to those blinded  
by the glare of too much pain or too much pleasure,  
and to comfort those who mourn because their dreams  
have been turned to stone, and have crumbled at their feet.

The prophet brings gifts in the form of speech, a gift of words.  
But what are mere words? Are words anything of substance?  
Can words really do anything about the harsh realities of  
human existence?

Sticks and stones may break my bones,  
and what can words do to help me?

But somehow *these* are words that crack the ice,  
poetry that softens the frozen heart,  
a vision that warms the soul.

*These* words echo the ancient Word,  
the Word before all words,  
the Word that sang all creation into being,

the Word that was there when the laws of the universe were  
established.

*These words penetrate to the heart ,  
and become embedded deep within us, like seeds in the earth.  
They remain buried, dormant, under layers of ice and snow,  
under a mortgage payment, or divorce papers, or a grave stone.  
But there they remain, planted...waiting.*

And as we hear *these words* of the Psalmist and the Prophet,  
time becomes less of a matter.  
The playful shifting of tense – past, present, future –  
lifts us for a moment above our present circumstances,  
into God's time, into God's eternity.

We remember the happiest times of our lives, when...  
*we were like those who dream...*

*our mouth was full of laughter  
our tongue with shouts of joy*

Then, without no notice, the Psalmist shifts into prayer for today  
that we would be restored again,  
that we who *go out weeping...and sow in tears...*  
*would come home with shouts of joy,  
carrying our sheaves.*

The prophet begins by saying the Spirit of the Lord *IS* upon me, NOW,  
to bring good news to the afflicted,  
to bind up the brokenhearted;  
but when will this happen,  
because he quickly shifts to the future tense,  
and speaks of all that God *will* do?

Perhaps it means that God's promises, once made,  
are as good as fulfilled, it's a good as if it's already come to pass,  
even if we have to wait on it.

Or maybe the prophet and the poet have raised children,  
who have a hard time waiting for joy, but having tasted joy once,  
they want it at every opportunity.  
*Children, you know, are that way.*

Have you ever had to distract a young child with imagination.  
When little Johnny wants an ice cream from the ice cream truck,  
but it skips your street that night.  
So as you hear it's jingle getting further away  
you sit on the front steps and imagine with Johnny  
what he would have had, and what you would like to have,

in all of its delicious detail,  
and hopefully what you will have when the ice cream truck  
comes again.

Just imagine it, and hope for it, and find strength in the waiting.

Or if little Lucy is afraid to go to school,  
so you imagine with her how happy her teacher will be to see her,  
and you imagine with her her class noticing all of her pretty dress,  
and you imagine how smart she will be,  
and how beautiful her art work and handwriting will be.  
And her eyes are lifted beyond their first intimidating moments,  
and her fear is held at bay by a vision of what will be.

In sports, many athletes practice visualization before a shot.  
Imagining the basketball swishing through the net,  
or the football, sailing through the uprights,  
or the golf ball following the perfect trajectory,  
then dropping and rattling in the bottom of the cup.

So the psalmist and the prophet know the power of words  
to bring the imagination to life, and raise the eyes to the horizon,  
to be the seeds of joy in the human soul,  
planted, and waiting...

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So Paul writes to the church of Thessalonica,  
possibly one of the earliest writings of the New Testament.  
Paul writes to a church that is suffering intense persecution for their faith.  
So much so that, for the sake of the mission, Paul has had to flee.  
But he writes to them in their affliction, encouraging them to hold fast  
and to await the Lord's return with constant diligence.

The Christians of Thessalonica – and you and I –  
are like the Pevensie children and the Beavers,  
who have heard the news, and have seen the signs  
of our Savior's coming:  
and who hear the sound of running water,  
and see the shoots emerging from the snow,  
but the Witch is still present, fighting for all she's worth,  
to take as many down with her as she can.

So Paul writes:  
*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing,  
give thanks in all circumstances;*

*for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.  
Do not quench the Spirit, and...[interestingly]  
Do not despise the words of prophets...*

Why?

Because prophets have a tendency to say things  
that sound ridiculous at the moment the words are spoken.

They tend to describe the word in a way that is rather opposite  
to anything that is visible to the human eye.

To the prosperous and powerful, they warn of a reversal of fortune,  
and of accountability on a day of judgment.

To the afflicted, they make promises of a new and glorious day,  
a day of rejoicing and the delights of the heart.

They say things with preposterous confidence, like:

*The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.  
The zeal of the Lord of hosts WILL DO THIS.*

Yet for all their unreasonableness,

the *words of prophets* plant seeds into the ground of despair,  
seeds of joy in the valley of affliction.

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In closing,

lest we be disillusioned when we walk out those doors  
and reality hits us full in the face, let's remember:

Seeds of joy are still seeds;

they have not yet emerged from the ground,

they have not yet emerged even as shoots,  
much less a full garden,

they are certainly not yet the majestic oaks of righteousness  
that they will someday be.

They are still seeds, under the ground.

Seeds of Joy are probably not felt by us as happiness, or elation.

But by their mere presence in the soil of the soul,

they can give a quiet inner strength,

a deep peace about what will be,

a profound knowing that all will be well in the grace of Jesus Christ.

Christmas will come. The long winter will end.

The pains of labor will bring forth a child.

The dark will yield to the dawn.

*And those who go out weeping bearing the seed for sowing  
shall come home with shouts of joy  
carrying their sheaves.*