

ISAIAH 35:1-10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it 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.

3 Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
4 Say 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.'

5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
6 then 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;
7 the 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.

8 A 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 traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.
9 No 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.
10 And 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.

ROMANS 12:9-21

⁹ Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour.¹¹ Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' ²⁰No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.'²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

SERMON

On the James Taylor Christmas album, he sings my favorite Christmas Hymn, In the Bleak Midwinter. I love that song, and I listen to it all the time, so simply by the fact that it's the song right before it on the album, I end up listening a lot to another song, called "Who Comes This Night" written by an American composer for James Taylor. Normally I don't like it when musicians try to come up with new and catchy Christmas tunes. I'm something of a Christmas music purist, I like my hymns, preferably in Latin. But this one tune, "Who Comes This Night," caught my ear a few years ago, and it's a song that has stuck with me. I look forward to pulling out the CD each year at Thanksgiving and listening once again.

The song tells the story of the nativity, like so many others, but what's a bit different about it is that never once is the name Jesus

mentioned. Instead of calling him “Jesus” or “the baby” throughout this song Christ is called “the stranger.”

Who comes this night, this wintry night,
As to the lowly manger?
The Shepherds and the Kings did come
To welcome in the stranger.¹

And I love this, because it’s a reminder, to me, of what these seasons of Advent and Christmas are really all about. This is a time of year when we should do what Paul says in Romans 12, we should, so far as it depends of us, live peaceably with all. Living peaceably, as Paul lays it out, means that we extend hospitality to one another, that we welcome in the saints, rejoicing with one another, weeping together, blessing those who harm us, and to our enemies we eschew violence and vengeance and instead offering food and drink to those we hate. This is not a small ask, welcoming everyone, even the enemy, that’s really not the Norman Rockwell image of a Christmas, is it?

But contrary to Norman Rockwell and popular belief, Christmas is not just a time for family or friends. Christmas is, in the most Christian sense, a season about the stranger. It’s a time when we tell the story of an unknown couple who wandered into a small town, couldn’t find a place to stay, so they sheltered in a barn. We tell that they were so unknown, the angels of the Lord had to appear to the shepherds to tell them of the news of this baby. And the only ones there to welcome in the stranger, the baby, who is Immanuel, God with us, were those same shepherds, coming in from the fields, covered in dust and sweat.

¹ “Who Comes This Night?” Sung by James Taylor. Song and Lyrics by Dave Grusin

When we hear the Christmas Story, as we will again in a bit this morning, it's good to be reminded of what actually happened. Jesus was a stranger, was born in a barn, a smelly, bacteria ridden cave, because no one was willing to open up their homes to his parents, to share the warmth of their fire, the bread of their tables.

And who came that wintry night to welcome the stranger, the baby in the manger? No one of importance. Instead, the baby was born in obscurity next to a cow, welcomed into this world by a group of dirty, gangly shepherds. He was, in all ways, a stranger, no one special, just a baby, unknown to the people of the town.

And this story, about a stranger born in a manger, this song I've come to love asks "who will come this wintry night to welcome in the stranger?" This question sticks in my brain during the Christmas season because they make me ask: How have I welcomed the stranger, who is Christ, into my home?

Like those people 2000 years ago, I think that's the call of Christmas for us still today: to welcome in the stranger. To offer the bread and wine of our own tables. To be hospitable people, open to all. To seek after the face of Jesus when it arrives in a face we don't recognize. To choose to be promote peace in our community, so far as it depends on us, by making sure that we choose welcome over fear, and hospitality over comfort.

At the close of worship today, as we transition into the Christmas Pageant, I'll play this song for us. And as you listen, I would invite you to ask yourself that question: who are you called to welcome in this season? And will you have eyes to see Christ in them?