

Blue Christmas Sermon: Love Came Down
By Amanda A. Nevin
November 30, 2014
Readings from Isaiah 40 and Matthew 11:28-30

Many of us are no strangers to darkness. All of us have experienced physical darkness at some point in our lives, maybe it was while we were camping in the wilderness, maybe we got caught in a storm at night without power, maybe it was playing a game of sardines with friends. In any circumstance of utter darkness there is nothing more comforting than a small beam of light to bring us comfort and hope. We also experience darkness in many other forms like: grief, loss, depression, loneliness, exhaustion, or maybe feelings of being in exile. Maybe you lost someone dear to you and the world seems darker because they illuminated your world and now it feels like you cannot see. Maybe you are suffering from depression and no matter how hard you struggle to dig out of your hole, the darkness seems to push you down further. Maybe you are estranged from family members and for you this season is a painful reminder that you are without a loved one and that space at the table will be empty either for the first time or once again. Maybe this Psalm, Psalm 22: (1-2) speaks to your heart today “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night but find no rest.” Maybe the anxiety sets in because you don’t have money to spend on gifts. Maybe you have too many losses to count: financial, emotional, and relational and darkness seeps in and threatens to overwhelm you. Maybe you are seeing all of the news in our world today- like the riots in Ferguson and Oakland after the verdict came down this last week in the officer involved shooting of the young black man in Ferguson, or the increasing Ebola epidemic, the tensions in the Middle East that are growing, the ISIS crisis in Syria, the many reports of violence and death and you feel like our world is full of darkness more than light itself and you wonder: if there is a loving God why has he not shown his face in the midst of all this turmoil. Maybe you are just sick and tired of the overwhelming consumerism that is rampant in this country and wondering where the meaning of Christmas has really gone? Maybe as you walk into the stores rather than feeling the holiday cheer you feel suffocated and confused by all the pressure to buy, buy, buy. We each experience our own darkness, some of us can name it, some of us cannot, but it is there at times. These circumstances are hard at any time of the year but they seem to be more difficult at this year thanks in part to the Hallmark store created image of what Christmas ought to be—happy and perfect, everything neat and orderly, everything cheery and peace on earth! At this time of year though, the days are shorter; the weather a little chillier; (rain which for some makes it gloomy feeling); and so it can feel even darker at times, more depressing and more lonely. On top of this we add the sounds of “holiday cheer” around us and for many of us that cheer is just something that we can’t conjure up, Christmas is rather “blue.”

In our Isaiah passage the people of Judah are in captivity in Babylon, away from Jerusalem, far from God’s graces, far from their normal practices of worship, comforts of their homes, away from their holiday’s and celebrations as a nation, away from their Sabbath rituals. The darkness looms in their hearts. One question in particular: did they have a future? Would God again work in their midst or would abandon them to exile forever? Could God act, would he act, would he come down and rescue them from their captivity? For many of us this season may feel like a time of exile, a time where we wonder if God is for us? If God is really in the midst of our pain and suffering? If God loves us enough to give us a future and a hope? The chapter starts off with “comfort, comfort” a tender expression of God’s love as the people had been mourning and wondering if there was “anyone” to comfort them in the midst of their exile? God tells Isaiah to speak tenderly and comfort Jerusalem for the sadness and longing that they had been experiencing as a people in exile. The Isaiah passage speaks to the hope of

the Savior that is to come, and that God hears the longings of their heart. God will not abandon them to their pain and suffering. When the prophet announces a voice of one calling out, it is with the intent that God's decree of comfort and pardon to the people of Israel is already in process, there is hope for redemption and forgiveness moving forward, God decrees it, not because of anything Israel did, but because God lavishes his grace upon the undeserving people. God's proclamation of forgiveness and assurance of his almighty presence is spoken to his people who have been wandering in the darkness. In verses 3-5 the entire emphasis is that no obstacle will prevent God from coming in forgiveness and deliverance to His people. Even the Psalmist in Psalm 22 recognizes in the midst of struggle that God is still in control. The psalmist says this "yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted and you delivered them. To you they cried and were saved; in you they trusted and were not put to shame! (3-5). Israel (and our ancestors) trusted in God even in the midst of their pain and suffering, even in those moments when they felt abandoned and lost. The same was true for Judah in the midst of this Isaiah passage. Nothing will stand in the way of God coming to comfort his people and to bring his light and hope in the midst of adversity.

Many of us are acquainted with the paradox of the Advent and Christmas seasons – a time when we feel we are supposed to celebrate hope, love, joy and peace, and yet a time that can also be full of depression, sadness and grief. Christmas is about generations of faithful people who were eagerly awaiting the coming Messiah like the prophet Isaiah preached about a people who were like us—scared, lonely and saddened by life's hardships, disappointment, and hurt. Even our most fervent faith will not erase life's struggle and pain but it will give us strength to keep on going even in the midst of a blue Christmas. We know though in our heart of hearts that Christmas isn't about its wrappings—beautiful and alluring as they are. Christmas isn't about the tree, the hallmark image of a picture perfect postcard, the lights, the decorations, the parties, etc. it is about Jesus birth. Christmas is about God's promise to a people who had walked in darkness, grief and despair for a very long time. Christ's birth ushered in a light that shines in the midst of our pain and suffering, a light that brings eternal hope even in the midst of the deep sadness and mourning that we experience in this life. Christ's birth reminds us that Jesus did not come into a safe, sanitized world of Christmas cards and children's pageant, but that Jesus—God in human flesh was born into the craziness of this world. He was born into darkness to bring hope to bring light. What these passages and the birth of Christ remind is that if God is for us, who can stand against us? If God came down to walk among his creation, then will he not also hold us in the palm of his hands as we suffer? Will our suffering end over night? Will our pain and loss and sadness go away even in the midst of this holiday where people shout out "cheer?" Most likely not! And yet we can walk in the knowledge that God is with us even in the midst of our sadness, our loss, our darkness and he can be our hope. We don't have to be anything or feel anything other than what our heart feels. We are not judged by Christ or commanded to be or do anything other than rest in the loving arms of our heavenly father. We don't have to fear his judgment or put on a pretend face to live in to this season. Like the song this morning: Sovereign, we are called to trust, to trust that God is still all powerful, all loving, and that no matter what comes our way God is still trustworthy. This season is to be a season of reflection on the meaning of Christmas, which at its heart is about the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who himself experienced pain and suffering, who was born into the messiness of our world to bring hope, light and salvation. Christ knows our hearts, our joys and our sorrows and asks for nothing more than for us to come as we are and celebrate him in our pain and in our hope; in our sorrow and in our joy. We don't have to put on a pretend face with Jesus or deny our feelings in order to worship our Lord and Savior. We are invited to come to the manger and see Christ once again as a loving Lord who wants nothing more than to carry our burdens, our sorrows and our pain. Sometimes heroism consists of simply getting up in the morning and making it through another day.

This season is about Christ, about his love and his grace for each and every one of us, for the ones who are eagerly awaiting the joy of Christmas celebrations and those who are walking into a season of sadness and loneliness; where ever we find ourselves today, Christ is in the midst of it all, Christ is there to hold us in our suffering and to dance with us in our Joy. Christ is there in the midst of the craziness and in the quiet moments, in the longing and in the tears, in the reflections and in the forgetfulness, in the peace and in the anxiety. Christ is big enough to hold in his hands our hearts. May this Christmas tide be a time in which you can lean in to Christ, find comfort in the midst of the suffering and hope that the future will be brighter, that joy may return one day and that our hearts will feel the very presence of Christ in the midst of all that we are dealing with. Our response as the faith community is to remember that there are many in our world for whom the holidays are a very painful time. Our job is not assume that everyone is enjoying the season but, to open our ears and hearts to those who may be suffering, to provide a place where we invite others to be open and real with what they are doing without judgment or trying to solve their problems; to be a community where people feel safe to come as there are without fear of condemnation or expectations to be something else; to remember those who are mourning and maybe send them a special card, or open a place at your Christmas table for someone who is alone, to pay attention and to be open to how we can serve those for whom this season is a difficult season. The manger is our reminder that we are still a people in waiting, we know that Christ has come once as a child born in a manger and that Christ will one day return and as we live in the in between we hold on to Christ who is our light and our salvation.