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First Christian Church
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Singing the Questions and Answers of Christmas I. How Can We Sing?

Psalm 137:1-6 *The Message* Alongside Babylon's rivers we sat on the banks; we cried and cried, remembering the good old days in Zion. Alongside the quaking aspens we stacked our unplayed harps; that's where our captors demanded songs, sarcastic and mocking: "Sing us a happy Zion song!" Oh, how could we ever sing God's song in this wasteland?

Romans 5:5, 8:24 New Revised Standard Version ...hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.... For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

When one of our sons was about twelve, he went to church camp that summer, and he has given me his permission to tell this story. This was a specially-themed camp focusing on music, art, and drama, and each youth was asked to bring an instrument (if they played one) and to be ready to work on an end-of-the-week original musical highlighting what they'd learned about God that week. The stated expectation was that every camper would have a part in the band and the chorus. I arrived to pick up our son at the end of the week, and to watch, with the other parents, this musical that they had worked so hard on. But as that musical went on, I noticed something. Despite his having brought his instrument, and despite that expectation that every camper would be in the chorus, our son was neither in the band nor the chorus and, in fact, had the only non-speaking part in the musical. Later I asked the camp director what was going on and he told me that our son – like Bartleby the Scrivener in Hermann Melville's classic story by the same name who simply kept saying "I prefer not" – had simply refused to sing or play – politely, respectfully, and not angrily, the director reported, but simply matter-of-factly. "I prefer not."

When Barbara and I moved to the wilds of small town west Texas desert life to

our first churches out of seminary, my church had both an organist and a pianist and often they would play together on the hymns. But “play together” is a bit of a misnomer, for the two of them didn’t much like each other and sometimes the pianist decided that she didn’t like the key that the organist was playing the hymn in so she played it in a different key, each getting louder and louder to try to win the key contest. And once I remember – because, truth be known, the pianist wasn’t fond of me sometimes either – the pianist decided she didn’t like the closing hymn I’d chosen so she played an entirely different hymn!

The culture all around us tell us – no, it **assails** us – with the fact that it is the *Christmas* season. And it has been doing so for two months now. The radio and tv and Pandora and Facebook are rife with songs and advertisements and postings, so many of which contain the **assumption** that this is, by far, the best time of the year, the happiest time, the most beautiful time, the time when you are **expected** to be cheerful, delighted, joyful, happy. After all, Andy Williams – in a song that I have heard already a dozen times this season – tells you so! [*Play the first few measures of “It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year.”* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFtb3EtjEic>] Except I have to ask: does anyone here want to tell Andy “*Put a sock in it.*” Or, maybe if not today, maybe you can recall a time when, like my dueling organist and pianist, the culture told you that you were “supposed” to be one thing, but you felt oh-so-different?

- I know that there are those here who have come to worship this morning feeling not at all like *“it’s the most wonderful time of the year.”*
- I know that there are those here who spend too many middle-of-the-night hours sleepless over too many bills and too little money.
- I know that there are those here whose hole in their hearts from the loss of someone dear is raw and hurting this day.

We all know of other reasons for not yet being ready for Christmas:

- For some, relationships with children or parents are not a source of joy but a source of pain.
- Or, a marriage is in a rocky spot.
- Or, there are loved ones in the military who are in harm's way overseas and fear for their safety is an ever-present companion.

If any of those folks are you this morning, then you too may well feel like our son at camp or like Melville's Bartleby and just want to say *"No – I prefer not. In fact, I can't for it just doesn't feel anything close to the 'most wonderful time of the year' and there are times that I just don't know how I will get through the next four weeks."*

Now, on the other hand, if that is **not** you this morning, I am glad indeed! If you are one who is in fact ready to greet Christmas and you find your life lovely and moving forward in wondrous ways, then I am happy for you indeed. But I suspect that even if that is you this morning, you nonetheless **have** had or you **will** have those other sorts of moments, those moments when life is hard, moments when you don't feel like singing, when you just don't feel what the culture tells you you're "supposed" to feel and you find yourself playing one emotional tune while incessantly all around you is the music of other tunes entirely. What do you do in those sort of moments when you find that you just can't sing and when you are so out of synch with what seems "expected"?

To begin to find our answers to that question, we have to first remember three very crucial things. First we have to keep in mind something that the culture around us hardly realizes and that is this: it's **NOT** the Christmas season. No, for Christians, it is the **Advent** season and that means something entirely different. Oh, it's fun at this time of the year to begin to see houses decorated in their incandescent Christmas finery, it's delightful to think about those things we want to give others for Christmas, it can be fun

to plan Christmas parties and anticipate cooking or baking or eating those things that we associate with this time of year, it can be a joy to think about finding the perfect Christmas present for those we love, it can be fun to watch all the old Christmas movies or spend too much time on Pinterest or Instagram reveling in certain folks' crafty Christmas creativity. But the Christian tradition reminds us that none of those things will answer our question of how we sing when we just don't feel like singing, or when we are in a place in our lives where none of those things is touching us in the way that the world around us tell us they're "supposed" to. For you see, Advent is to Christmas in something like the same way Lent and Good Friday are to Easter. Advent is the honest acknowledgment that the world is far from perfect, that hurt and pain and loss and hardship and injustice are still with us. We love the joy and triumph of Easter, we revel in the good news of Emmanuel, God-with-us, of Christmas, but there is a sense in which to celebrate these without first honestly recognizing the imperfections of life is too cheap, and it makes it much much too easy to slide past the very real tragedies and evils of war and injustice and homelessness and hunger. If Christ is only the Christ of Christmas and Easter then we risk forgetting that He is the Christ of those who hurt and those who are the victims of meanness and bullying and hatred.

And that is, in part, why the church insists that it is now **Advent**, and not **yet** Christmas. And the theological tone of Advent is indeed the honest acknowledgment of the realities of this imperfect world on the one hand, and waiting with hope on the other hand. The realities are indeed expressed so well by our Psalm this morning, the Psalm which our choir so hauntingly offered as our introit today, when those ancient Hebrew people, torn from homeland and enslaved in Babylon, also did not, could not, find themselves in harmony with the culture around them. *"Alongside Babylon's rivers we sat on the banks; we cried and cried...."* even though the Babylonians insisted that they

be cheerful, that they sing their happy songs. But they, like we sometimes, could not, they could not.

But that leads us to the second thing to remember, particularly on those occasions where we too feel like exiles, where the joy around us does not resonate within us, when the sounds of the season duel with the dirge that inhabits our hearts. The great Disciples preacher Fred Craddock begins his morning prayers every single day with this prayer: *“Gracious God, we are grateful for a way of life and work that is more important than how we feel about it on any given day.”* Do you hear the power in that prayer? For it too, is counter to what our cultures tells us – which is that how we *feel* about something is the very most important thing that there is. But those who have devoted themselves and pledged themselves to follow Jesus Christ do well to remember that there will be times when we simply don’t feel very Christian! We don’t feel like we measure up. Or, we don’t feel like we want to follow the Golden Rule anymore of doing unto others as we would have them do unto us and instead feel like “doing it unto others before they get a chance to do it unto us.” Or we don’t feel like remembering that Jesus reminded us that whenever we feed the hungry and clothe the ill-clad and house the homeless we do those things for Jesus Himself. Am I right? Well, Dr. Craddock’s prayer is the solemn reminder to us that our calling as Christians is not necessarily to feel good on every day about that calling – because if it were which of us would not fall! – but to heed the command of the One who said not “Come, feel good about Me,” but “Come, follow me, follow me.”

The other thing that Dr. Craddock’s prayer is a reminder of us the importance of community. Did you note the pronoun in his prayer? “We.” “We.” **“We are grateful.”** You see, the very hardest thing about trying to be a Christian apart from a community of believers, a community of those who dedicate themselves to following Christ, is that

when the storms of life come – and they will – and you don't feel like singing joyous songs – and you won't – there will be folks around you who have been through what you are going through, who have come out on the other side, who can, as Dr. Craddock says elsewhere, believe on your behalf, believe for you, when you are finding it oh-so-hard yourself. You see, I understand those folks around us who increasingly declare that they are “spiritual, not religious” and who believe that is just as apt for them to find God in the beauties of nature or in times of solitude or in a sunset or mountain peak. I understand them because for too many people, their experience of “church” has been one of judgmentalism or ignorance or just plain boredom. And so they come to think that it would be better just to invent their own religion focused in the awesomeness of, say, nature. But, as preacher Lillian Daniel aptly says, “ So you find God in the sunset? Great, so do I. But how about in the face of cancer. Cancer is nature too. Do you worship that as well?” And in response to those “spiritual but not religious” parents who don't want to “force” religion or church on their children, she wisely notes that such parents “have set up a vacuum in which the answers get invented without any formation or guidance” and they have no “place, [no] spiritual community, in which to go deeper.”¹

The community that is the church, the community gathered by Jesus is indeed imperfect, but it is also a community that knows that it is bound together and “caught up in the beauty of something bigger than [its] own invention,” a community that is “blessed by the repetition that gives its chaotic days meaning.”² It is a community that knows it has a calling and a way of life that transcends how you or I may feel on any given day – for if it didn't, you and I would indeed have no resources to draw on on those days in which we cannot feel joy, when we do feel like exiles, when we do not feel like singing.

¹Lillian Daniel, When “Spiritual But Not Religious” Is Not Enough, Kindle edition, pg. 6

²Ibid.

But we **do** have such resources. We have people around us who know that God works in and through the hard things and not just the glorious things. We have people around us who – as annoyingly imperfect as they can be sometimes! – remind us that no matter what, no matter what, God is always offering hope for moving forward into a new day, a new creation, a new song.

And that, in fact, is the third and final thing to remember on this first Sunday of Advent. Advent is indeed about hope. Advent is not only the realization and acknowledgment of the hurt, the imperfection, the pain of life, but it is also the assertion that none of these things overcome or defeat the One whom God is sending. Advent is the reminder that there have been times when hope has overcome the forces of bigotry and racism and xenophobia and homophobia and sexism, and that, in Christ, these overcomings can and will happen yet again. And my friends, such hope will find more and more moments in which it can and does overcome that which would hurt and demonize and dehumanize when you and I help it to happen, no matter how we may feel, no matter how we may despair sometimes. That hope can indeed more and more overcome when you and I – with the help of the church – more and more commit ourselves to doing those things that are found on our bulletin cover today, through which we testify through what Dr. Craddock calls our “way of life” that we do believe that hope can and will overcome hate. Even in a week like this one just past, when hope may have come hard and and injustice and mayhem have seemed so strong, on this first Sunday of Advent Christ calls us to re-commit through our actions to live and act and love with hope, with audacious hope indeed.

Lillian Daniel tells the story of

...a family new to [her] church, whose grade-school kids had only a year of

Sunday school under their belts. In the middle of what was his second Christmas

pageant rehearsal ever, the little boy cried out in total exasperation “Do you mean to tell me that we are doing exactly the same story we did last year?”³

Why yes, yes we are indeed. For while we wait for Christmas, we will re-commit ourselves to Advent’s call to once again be people of hope, people who engage in acts of hope, those who indeed know that such commitment, such acts are the call and the commission of the coming Christ to all who would follow Him. And that is how, indeed, we can sing on this and every morning, that is how we can sing. Amen.

³ibid., p. 11