

ISAIAH 40:1-11 AND MARK 1:1-8

A MAN NAMED ROBERT ROBERTS WROTE ABOUT AN OBSERVATION HE MADE YEARS AGO THAT INVOLVED TWO DIFFERENT ELEMENTARY LEVEL CLASSES.

THE FIRST GROUP WAS FOURTH GRADERS AND THEY WERE GIVEN TWO BALLOONS WITH LONG STRINGS, AND TOLD TO TIE ONE TO EACH ANKLE.

THE CHILDREN WERE THEN GIVEN INSTRUCTIONS ABOUT A GAME CALLED "BALLOON STOMP."

THE OBJECT WAS TO POP ANOTHER CHILD'S BALLOON WHILE PROTECTING YOUR OWN. THE CHILD WHO KEPT AT LEAST ONE BALLOON THE LONGEST- WON.

THE NOISY AND ACTIVE GAME BEGAN WITH MUCH ENTHUSIASM ON THE PART OF THE PARTICIPANTS. AND IT DID NOT TAKE LONG FOR IT TO BE OVER.

THE SECOND CLASS WAS A MIXED GROUP OF MENTALLY HANDICAPPED CHILDREN. THEY WERE ALL GIVEN BALLOONS WITH THE SAME INSTRUCTIONS.

HOWEVER, THEY PLAYED THE GAME DIFFERENTLY, PERHAPS BECAUSE THEY DID NOT GRASP THE RULES WELL ENOUGH.

WHAT THEY DID ALL UNDERSTAND, WAS THAT THE OBJECT WAS TO POP ALL OF THE BALLOONS.

BUT INSTEAD OF RUSHING TO STOMP THOSE TIED TO CLASSMATE'S ANKLES, THE CHILDREN HELPED EACH OTHER.

ONE CHILD HELD HIS OR HER OWN BALLOONS FOR ANOTHER TO POP, AND THEN REVERSED THE FAVOR.

THE RESULT WAS NOT A BATTLE THAT SOUGHT A WINNER, BUT A GROUP OF CHILDREN WORKING TOWARDS THE SAME GOAL.

NEITHER GROUP DID WRONG, YET THE SECOND EXHIBITED A SPIRIT OF COOPERATION MISSING FROM THE FIRST.

IN EACH CASE THE WAY THE GAME WAS PLAYED WAS BASED UPON THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE PARTICIPANTS.

I SHARE THIS STORY BECAUSE IT POINTS US TO CONSIDER HOW WE CAN PREPARE FOR CHRISTMAS, ESPECIALLY DURING CHALLENGING TIMES.

AFTER ALL, THE SEASON IS UPON US, AND AS ONE SECULAR CAROL SAYS:

"IT'S THE MOST WONDERFUL TIME OF THE YEAR WITH THE KIDS JINGLE BELLING AND EVERYONE TELLING YOU 'BE OF GOOD CHEER'. IT'S THE MOST WONDERFUL TIME OF THE YEAR IT'S THE HAP-HAPPIEST SEASON OF ALL...."

TRULY MOST PEOPLE LOVE THIS TIME OF THE YEAR, BUT PERHAPS ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS OF 2020 THIS IS A LITTLE LESS SO FOR MANY.

THIS IS WHY FOR CHRISTIANS, ONE WAY TO KEEP THE SEASON IN OUR HEARTS NO MATTER HOW GOOD OR DIFFICULT, SAD OR HAPPY OUR PRESENT CIRCUMSTANCES ARE, IS TO REMEMBER ITS NAME.

THE SEASON IS NOT "SANTA-MAS" OR HOLIDAY-MAS" OR EVEN "X-MAS", BUT "CHRIST-MAS--CHRISTMAS."

IT IS IN THE NAME WE ARE REMINDED OF THE REASON WE CELEBRATE THIS TIME OF YEAR IS- JESUS.

OR AS A MESSAGE FOUND ON A CHURCH SIGNBOARD ONE DECEMBER SAID: "WITHOUT CHRIST THERE IS NO CHRISTMAS."

CHRISTMAS IS SPECIAL BECAUSE IT DRAWS US BACK TO THE TIME OF CHRIST'S BIRTH.

IT REMINDS US THAT IN LITTLE LORD JESUS, THE DIVINE AND HUMAN ARE JOINED TOGETHER IN PERFECT PEACE.

AND AN OLD CHRISTMAS CARD FOCUSES OUR ATTENTION ON JESUS AND THE MEANING OF HIS BIRTH BY ASKING: "WHERE WOULD WE BE WITHOUT JESUS?"

THE CARD CONTINUES BY ANSWERING: “HE WAS BORN OF A WOMAN, SO WE COULD BE BORN OF GOD.

HE HUMBLED HIMSELF, SO WE COULD BE LIFTED UP. HE BECAME A SERVANT SO WE COULD BE MADE HEIRS.

HE SUFFERED REJECTION SO WE COULD BECOME HIS FRIENDS. HE DENIED HIMSELF SO WE COULD FREELY RECEIVE ALL THINGS.

HE GAVE HIMSELF SO HE COULD BLESS US IN EVERYWAY. MAY YOU KNOW HIS LOVE THIS CHRISTMAS.”

THESE WORDS REMIND US ALSO THAT THE FIRST CHRISTMAS PRESENT GIVEN WAS BY GOD TO US.

AND THAT GIFT OF LOVE WAS GOD HIMSELF, WRAPPED IN THE INCARNATION AND BIRTH OF CHRIST OUR SAVIOR. TRULY, JESUS EMBODIES GOD’S LOVE, AND ALSO GOD’S PEACE.

FOR REAL PEACE IS FOUND IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD WITHOUT FEAR DUE TO OUR SINFULNESS.

SUCH WAS THE PEACE ADAM AND EVE EXPERIENCED DAILY BEFORE THEY SINNED.

THIS IS THE PEACE EVERYONE HAS BEEN SEARCHING TO RECAPTURE EVER SINCE, BUT WE ALWAYS SEEM TO FALL SHORT OF THAT GOAL.

BUT, IN THE BIRTH OF JESUS, AND OUR CELEBRATION OF HIS BIRTH WE HAVE THE HOPE OF PEACE RESTORED.

JESUS IN FACT MADE PEACE BETWEEN US AND GOD, WITH HIS DEATH ON THE CROSS, AND THIS PEACE WAS CONFIRMED BY HIS RESURRECTION.

PERHAPS THIS IS WHY, IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK, THE STORY OF JESUS BEGINS WITH THE CALL TO REPENTANCE.

OF COURSE, FEW IF ANY VIEW A CALL TO REPENTANCE TO BE THE KIND OF “TIDINGS OF COMFORT AND JOY” THAT IS PROCLAIMED IN ANOTHER CHRISTMAS CAROL.

AND YET, IF WE THINK ABOUT IT MORE CLOSELY, IT ACTUALLY IS COMFORTING TO KNOW WE CAN BE FORGIVEN, WHICH IN TURN IMPLANTS PEACE, AND COMFORT, AND JOY IN OUR HEARTS.

REMEMBER- REPENTANCE LITERALLY MEANS TO TURN BACK OR TURN AROUND.

IT IS HOW WE PREPARE OURSELVES TO RECEIVE THE GIFT OF FORGIVENESS JESUS, THE PROMISED GOOD SHEPHERD, OFFERS.

TURNING BACK TOWARD GOD IS ONE WAY WE ARE ABLE TO EXPERIENCE THE PEACE JESUS PROMISED TO GIVE US.

THUS THE CALL TO REPENT THAT JOHN THE BAPTIST PROCLAIMED DOES FIT IN WITH OUR CHRISTMAS PREPARATIONS.

IN FACT, IF WE THINK ABOUT IT WE WILL FIND THAT REPENTANCE IS EVEN A HIDDEN THEME IN SOME MORE WORLDLY CHRISTMAS STORIES.

FOR EXAMPLE, CHARLES DICKEN’S “A CHRISTMAS CAROL” IS ALL ABOUT THE JOURNEY TO REPENTANCE.

IT IS ABOUT HOW A CHANGE OF HEART AND DIRECTION HAPPENED IN THE LIFE OF THE LEAD CHARACTER, SCROOGE.

IN THE STORY HIS PERSPECTIVE ABOUT MANY THINGS, INCLUDING THE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS CHANGED.

THIS CHANGE OF HEART BROUGHT A CHANGE IN CHARACTER, WHERE HE TURNED BACK TO BECOME MORE LIKE HIS YOUNGER SELF, WHO WAS NOT GREEDY OR MEAN.

A SIMILAR THEME IS FOUND IN THE DR. SEUSS STORY “HOW THE GRINCH STOLE CHRISTMAS.”

IN THAT STORY THE GRINCH ALSO HATED CHRISTMAS, AND SUCCEEDED IN STEALING ALL THE HOLIDAY DECORATIONS AND FOOD AND PRESENTS.

HE THOUGHT DOING THIS WOULD PREVENT THE PEOPLE FROM CELEBRATING ON CHRISTMAS DAY.

BUT THE WHOLE VILLAGE GATHERED ON CHRISTMAS MORNING TO SING A WELCOME TO THE DAY, AND THIS CHANGED THE GRINCH WHO RETURNED ALL HE HAD STOLEN.

ALTHOUGH JESUS IS NOT REALLY PART OF EITHER OF THESE STORIES THE MESSAGE OF REPENTANCE IS STILL THERE.

THE BELOVED CHRISTMAS TREE, CAN ALSO SERVE AS REMINDER OF OUR NEED TO REPENT SO WE MIGHT BE AT PEACE WITH GOD AND ANOTHER.

IN GENESIS WE ARE GIVEN THE STORY OF ORIGINAL SIN, AND IN THE GOSPELS WE HEAR ABOUT CHRIST'S WORK OF REDEMPTION. BOTH EVENTS INVOLVE TREES.

IT WAS ON THE TREE OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD AND EVIL THE FORBIDDEN FRUIT WAS FOUND, AND ON THE CROSS THAT WAS ONCE A TREE, JESUS DIED TO SAVE US FROM SIN.

THUS THE CHRISTMAS TREE ITSELF IS A SYMBOL OF THE HOPE AND PEACE AND JOY AND LOVE OF THE SEASON, AND OF OUR PREPARATION FOR AND CELEBRATION OF CHRIST'S BIRTH.

THERE IS A STORY TOLD BY POET, EDWIN MARKHAM CALLED "THE SHOEMAKERS DREAM".

IT CAN HELP TO REMIND US THAT THERE ARE OFTEN MANY SIGNS OF GOD RIGHT BEFORE OUR EYES, WHICH WE FAIL TO SEE.

THE STORY BEGINS WITH A COBBLER, WHO WAS ALSO A GODLY MAN. ONE NIGHT HE HAD A DREAM THAT JESUS WAS COMING TO VISIT HIM THE NEXT DAY.

IN THE MORNING HE AROSE EARLY TO GATHER GREENS AND OTHER THINGS TO ADORN HIS SHOP FOR THE SAVIOR'S VISIT.

ALL MORNING THE MAN WAITED FOR JESUS, BUT TO HIS GREAT DISAPPOINTMENT JESUS DID NOT ARRIVE.

THERE WAS HOWEVER AN OLD MAN WHO CAME TO THE DOOR AND ASKED IF HE COULD REST BY THE FIRE A FEW MINUTES.

THE COBBLER LET HIM IN, AND NOTICED NOT ONLY THAT THE MAN LIMPED, BUT THAT HIS SHOES WERE WORN OUT.

HE TOOK A NEW PAIR FROM THE SHELF AND GAVE THEM TO THE OLD MAN.

AFTER HE LEFT THE SHOEMAKER CONTINUED TO WAIT FOR THE LORD'S ARRIVAL, BUT WAS INTERRUPTED BY A WOMAN, STRUGGLING TO CARRY ON HER BACK A HEAVY LOAD OF FIREWOOD.

HE INVITED HER INSIDE TO REST. AND AS THEY TALKED HE LEARNED SHE HAD NOT EATEN IN TWO DAYS, SO HE FED HER A NOURISHING MEAL.

AS NIGHT BEGAN TO FALL THE SHOEMAKER WAS VERY SAD BECAUSE HIS DREAM SEEMED TO HAVE NOT BEEN TRUE SINCE HE HAS SEEN NO SIGN OF JESUS.

BUT BEFORE HE CLOSED HIS SHOP FOR THE NIGHT HE HEARD A CHILD CRYING, AND WHEN HE OPENED THE DOOR SAW THE CHILD.

HE DISCOVERED THE CHILD WAS LOST AND AFRAID, SO HE RETURNED THE CHILD HOME.

WHEN THE MAN ARRIVED BACK AT THIS SHOP HE WORRIED THAT JESUS MIGHT HAVE COME WHILE HE WAS GONE. FOR AS THE DARKNESS DEEPENED, THERE WAS NO SIGN OF JESUS.

AND IN HIS DISAPPOINTMENT THE COBBLER CRIED OUT TO THE LORD, ASKING WHY HE BROKE HIS PROMISE TO COME TO HIM.

THEN, HE HEARD THE LORD'S RESPONSE, ASSURING THE MAN HE HAD IN FACT BEEN TO SEE HIM THREE TIMES THAT DAY.

THE SAVIOR SAID HE WAS THE OLD MAN TO WHOM HE GAVE NEW SHOES, THE WOMAN WHO HE GAVE A MEAL TO, AND THE LOST CHILD HE RETURNED HOME.

THE MORALE OF THE STORY IS, OF COURSE, THAT JESUS IS OFTEN IN OUR MIDST IN THE PERSON OF THOSE WHO NEED OUR HELP.

PART OF OUR PREPARATION FOR CHRISTMAS EVE AND DAY IS TO SEEK TO OPEN OUR HEARTS AND MINDS, AS WELL AS OUR EYES AND EARS, TO SIGNS OF GOD'S PRESENCE.

SIGNS OF HIS PRESENCE MAY BE FOUND NOT ONLY IN THE FACES OF OTHER PEOPLE LIKE IN THE SHOEMAKER'S STORY, BUT ALSO IN MANY OF OUR CHRISTMAS DECORATIONS.

THINK ABOUT IT- IN THE BEAUTIFUL CHRISTMAS LIGHTS WE ARE REMINDED THAT THE LIGHT SHINES IN THE DARKNESS AND OVERCOMES IT, AND THAT THE JESUS IS THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD.

THE PRESENTS WE GIVE AND RECEIVE ON CHRISTMAS SYMBOLIZE THE LOVE WE SHARE, AS WELL AS THE GIFT OF GOD'S LOVE FOUND IN HIS SON.

OF COURSE, NONE OF OUR SEASONAL DECORATIONS OR ACTIVITIES ARE NECESSARY TO HONOR JESUS AND HIS BIRTHDAY, BUT FOR MANY THEY ARE CHERISHED THINGS.

SO, IF WE CHOOSE TO CELEBRATE THIS SEASON WITH: TREES AND LIGHTS AND WREATHS AND GIFTS AND CARDS AND FEASTING, LET US ALSO REMEMBER JESUS, AND GIVE THANKS FOR HIM WITH OUR WORDS AND DEEDS, ESPECIALLY BY HELPING OTHERS.

LET US ALSO TURN BACK TO GOD IN OUR HEARTS AND MINDS DAILY, SO THAT WE MIGHT BE FILLED WITH THE LIGHT OF CHRIST'S PEACE.

AND MAY THE MESSAGE FROM GOD, DELIVERED THROUGH THE PROPHET ISAIAH, REMIND US OF GOD'S FAITHFULNESS. "COMFORT, COMFORT MY PEOPLE, SAYS YOUR GOD...SEE THE LORD COMES WITH MIGHT...HE WILL FEED HIS FLOCK LIKE A SHEPHERD; HE WILL GATHER THE LAMBS IN HIS ARMS...."

THIS IS THE WORD--THE PROMISE, OF THE LORD, THANKS BE TO GOD AMEN.

SERMON SUMMARY-ISAIAH 40:1-11 AND MARK 1:1-8

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