

Yearning

Malachi 3:1-4
Psalm 126
Luke 3:1-6

Faith Community
December 7, 2003

Introduction

Do you sometimes feel like this world we live in is a wilderness? Recent events have made it seem that way. Some of our largest, most respected companies are entangled in scandals – some leaders at K-Mart have been indicted; others are afraid their name will come up; the fiascos at Enron and WorldCom are now legendary. Tyco Corporation's boss is in serious trouble.

These huge corporations, which we thought had such integrity, are rocked by accusations of greed and professional misconduct. Their CEO's are resigning in disgrace, and in some cases, handcuffs. Respected accounting firms, which we thought beyond reproach, are crumbling as they face accusation of mismanagement and fraud.

Talk show hosts, who were seen as icons, have been revealed to be addicts, allegedly involved with illegal drugs. Sports stars are routinely now accused of rape or drug use or drunkenness or vicious fights. A president is involved in a sex scandal. A sniper is shooting at innocent people on an expressway in Columbus, Ohio.

You know that I could go on with this most of the day.

Just this week we heard of a man in Germany who advertised for a volunteer whom he could kill and eat! Someone actually replied to his ad. The man is now on trial, but there are legal difficulties because Germany doesn't have a law against cannibalism – it's never come up before. They're not sure what to try him for.

Isn't it a wilderness we live in? It may be luxurious, but it's a wilderness.

I

We have a lot, but it doesn't buy us what we need. In all this excess, we feel emptiness.

The author of the Book of Revelation writes to the church at Laodicea and says, "You say you are rich and have prospered, but you don't realize you are wretched and pitiable." In the midst of great wealth there can be sadness and despair.

A pastor was visiting from Africa in the United States. As his American friend said good-bye to him at the airport, the American said, "I will be praying for you and the difficult situation you face. I am sorry for your situation." With political unrest, poverty and threats facing him, the African was returning to a terrible challenge.

The pastor was surprised to hear the African pastor say, "Actually, I have more sympathy for your situation."

“Yes, people here have so much that they think it will satisfy their needs. It is hard for them to hear the Gospel because they don’t think they need it. They think they already have everything they need.”

We talked a few weeks ago about the British survey that showed that the happiest country in the world is one of the poorest. The wealthiest people aren’t necessarily the happiest. We have all we need and more, but we don’t have what we really need.

II

God knows our need and has sent us the fulfillment we long for. God knows we can have all our physical, mental and emotional needs met, and we still suffer from a yearning. There must be a spiritual dimension to life that has to be there if we are to find real contentment. Maybe, the bottom line is that we need to know that our lives mean something and they’re going somewhere. Or, as Frederick Buechner put it, we need to know that this story has a plot to it. St. Augustine wrote about God, “You have created us for Yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in You.”

Regardless of whatever else we have or don’t have in life, we will be restless without God. God knows of that yearning.

I talked with a young woman recently who had everything going for her. During her senior year in high school she was elected homecoming queen, she was valedictorian of her class, she was a cheerleader, she was a member of the National Honor Society. Every honor, award, recognition had been given to her. She said she really enjoyed that for a while, but it wasn’t long before she was asking herself, “Is this all there is?”

All of it was wonderful, and she was very appreciative, but it was not ultimately satisfying. She felt a deeper yearning, and she was mature enough to know that it was a spiritual need.

God knows what we need and has responded to our longing. God sent his only son into the world.

III

This is the time of year when we prepare to receive the world’s greatest gift. Our time of preparation is a joyful celebration of what God has done. In the Christian faith we don’t just celebrate the day of Jesus birth, we celebrate a whole season. For four weeks we get ready – both inside and out.

This is a time when we move away from the madness of our world – out of the wilderness we find ourselves in – and get ready to receive the Lord of Lords.

Imagine what you would do if you got a phone call today that the president would be coming to your house in three weeks. You would madly begin to get everything ready. You’d start cleaning, rearranging the furniture, getting rid of old, un-presentable things, making everything just right.

A couple of years ago our daughter got married. During the summer of her wedding we got more done to the house than anytime before or after that. A big event was happening, we had to get ready. So we fixed faucets that leaked, and doors that stuck. We brightened up everything inside and out – we painted her room and planted flowers and spread mulch. We wanted everything to be not just presentable, but good.

And all the time we kept remembering why all this was important. A great event was happening. It was a time of joyful preparation. Imagine what you would do if the president was coming to your house. Now imagine how you would want to prepare for God coming!

IV

During this Advent season we prepare for the coming of Christ. There are lots of ways we can do that. Some of them are personal. We work those out in our relationship with God and in our prayers.

Your congregation helps with other preparations, which you can do alone or with others. The Advent Workshop this afternoon is an excellent way to get ready. There are items to make that you can use in your personal or family devotions. There you can visualize in a dramatic way the Christmas event.

The Cantata Academy presentation on the thirteenth is an excellent way to prepare your spirit. This is among the finest music you will hear this Advent. It will be inspiring and speak to your soul.

Worship on Sunday morning helps us as we hear again the great story we celebrate.

But also be creative. I know one family that gets together on Sunday evenings in Advent and shares a meal together. Then they read the scripture lesson for the day, light the Advent candle and pray together.

What is the best way for you to prepare for Christ's coming?

Conclusion

The greatest one of all is coming to you and me. We have some things to do. We want to fix what's broken, brighten up our lives, be not just presentable but good. We want to reach into our spirits for what is real and true and meaningful. We want to be ready. After all, it is God who's coming.

Amen