

We live in an interesting time, do we not? To get a feel for the plight of humanity as we close out 2022 all we have to do is watch the nightly news. There are fires, floods, earthquakes, freak ice storms and record heat, hurricanes, and tsunamis. Last month we had a high of 79 degrees and yesterday we had a high of 9 degrees. Could all this signal that the end times are near? Did the last summit on global warming come in time to save us from destroying the planet, or is it too little, too late, as many predict?

There is the migrant crisis at our southern border and the refugee crisis that is worldwide. The Greek islands are dealing with a huge influx of refugees from Asia and Africa. People of faith have responded in a variety of ways. Should we welcome refugees with open arms? Should we then pray for the security of our homeland? Should we close our borders to all people to protect ourselves from people on the terrorist watchlist? Should we do more militarily in Ukraine to stop Putin’s aggression and to keep it from growing?

Then there is the religious frontline. We lament that Americans and Europeans are abandoning faith at an alarming rate. The world seems to be relying less and less on divine power and more and more on human power and ingenuity. The number of *nones* as they are called (people with no faith), is on the rise and nearly every denomination in the U.S. is aging.

And then there is our own denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA). As we look to the next General Assembly, there are a number of proposals on the table about how we will deal with every political and social issue imaginable, but not even one overture to address our declining numbers and the bitter divisions in our household of faith. Many people predict a dire future for Presbyterians. Is the end of our tradition drawing near? What will happen to us if the denomination continues to splinter and shrink?

The hard truth is that none of us knows the answers to any of these questions. We certainly have plenty opinions. We have a surplus of opinions in the U.S.A., don’t we? Many of us also have fears. Some of us think we have

solutions, but the fact is, we must all live with uncertainty about both our present and our future. But living with uncertainty does not mean living without *hope*. For our hope is not in human abilities to solve our problems, but in the God who created us and in our Lord Jesus who came to save us from sin and death.

Perhaps the most encouraging image for me came back on the 2nd Sunday of Advent when we heard Isaiah's prophecy about the "*shoot that comes up from the stump of Jesse.*" Everyone who returned home or to church for Christmas needs to hear about the hope that is ours in Christ Jesus. How beautiful and hopeful is the image of the shoot of new life sprouting from the stump of death!

- To the well-dressed couple sitting toward the back of the sanctuary, angry at themselves for letting their love die and their marriage dissolve: "*a shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse!*"
- To the steely-eyed atheist who doesn't believe a word any preacher has to say, but deep down wants to hear it anyway: "*a shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse!*"
- To the hollow-eyed teenager afraid of being shut out, and to the hand-wringing elderly person terrified of being shut in: "*a shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse!*"

All that is hopeful is hanging like ripened fruit on the branch that has grown from the root of Jesse. During the time of Isaiah, the Israelites were living in a time of great uncertainty. Our passage for today, written sometime around or after the exile ended and the refugees returned to their homeland, indicates that life back home in Israel was not going as smoothly as people had hoped it would. In our case, the days following Christmas may not go as smoothly as we are hoping for, either.

Isaiah brought his prophetic message to a diverse group of formerly exiled elite residents of Jerusalem and the very poor who had been unable to leave the city during the exile. The return home was not easy. The economy was shot. Canaanite rituals and beliefs had taken hold and had become blended with

Jewish practices, and many people had married outside the faith. Isaiah preached a tough message calling for an end to idolatry and pagan worship and condemned those who failed to observe the Jewish law.

But alongside these hard words, Isaiah also offers a vision of God's glorious restoration of Jerusalem. In chapter 60 Isaiah prophesied that Zion would one day be delivered and held in highest regard by all the nations. The exiles would come home, and a prophet would appear to bring liberation to the poor.

In today's Scripture, the prophet announces that he will pray continuously until God restores Jerusalem completely to its former glory. Even though times were hard, and people of faith had lost their way, God's promises would stand. It was a word of hope spoken during a very uncertain time.

Did Isaiah's words bring comfort to the people of his day? Did they believe that God would restore their holy city and all of its inhabitants? Were there other voices offering hope and promises in different forms, or calling for actions that might have led to very different outcomes? We don't know. We can't get inside the heads of the people of another time and place. We can only look to the words Isaiah offered to the hurting and frightened people of his day and try to hear them as words of hope for our own day and our own struggles.

I believe that no matter how scary things seem today, we must not respond with anger and fear. We must never lose hope. I believe in the good news of Jesus Christ and his promises. I believe that we must live by faith and trust in a future that is not ours to determine but will be determined by God alone. I believe the words Isaiah spoke to Israel are words for us:

The LORD has made proclamation to the ends of the earth:

“Say to Daughter Zion, ‘See, your Savior comes!

See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.

They will be called the Holy People, the Redeemed of the LORD;

and you will be called Sought After, the City No Longer Deserted.” (62:11-12)

For a few moments, let's reflect on some personal questions this Christmas Day: Do our members not compete with one another, hoping that others will notice how much we are doing around the church, because it makes us feel like we are good Christians? Are we not tempted to look down our noses on those who have less time to give, or who have less knowledge of the Bible, or who don't put as much in the offering plate? Do we not get irritated with the Christmas and Easter people who only surface twice a year? I know we don't want to be that way. But we are that way. We just are. It is the nature of humanity, the curse of original sin. We just can't help ourselves.

The good news is that Jesus Christ is the great equalizer. *"For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink"* (1 Corinthians 12:13). That means that whatever we have to offer, whatever gift we bring, however big or small, noticeable or quiet, visible or invisible, it is sufficient. Whatever we bring is enough.

Whatever our members bring, whenever they show up, even if it is late in the day and they are tired and all they are able to bring is their complaints and tears, it is sufficient. And it is not just sufficient—it is significant. Just as significant as what anyone else has to offer. John says that Jesus was and is the very same Word of God that was spoken in the beginning. Only in Jesus, did that Word become a human being, full of grace and truth. Jesus was and is the very Word of God which, when spoken, changed things.

Jesus was the eternal Word that brought life into being. We need not get caught up in the simple miracle of water being changed into wine by Jesus. After all, life itself is a much greater miracle, is it not?

The big problem we have today, with our electric lights, our hot and cold running water, our bath tubs and hot tubs and showers and flush toilets and automatic clothes washers and dishwashers and central heat and air conditioning and refrigerators and ovens and smart phones and televisions and computers and electronic gadgets and games, is that we are so surrounded by

these luxury items that we forget that life itself is nothing less than an absolute miracle spoken into being by God.

Maybe we have become so accustomed to the wonders of the modern world that what God did in Jesus of Nazareth no longer fills us with wonder. Maybe the miracle of life itself no longer fills us with wonder. But the Gospel of John reminds us that life itself is a wonder and a miracle.

Later, John also says there is a proper and true way that life is meant to be lived, and in fact, Jesus is that way, that truth, and that life, himself. This means that Jesus' life is the standard by which the lives of all other disciples are measured. According to Jesus, life does not consist of how many luxuries, like hot tubs, we surrounded ourselves with. In Christ, life consists of looking and listening as long as we live, as we seek to live as disciples of Jesus and holding our fellow human beings in the highest regard, second only to our awe for God who spoke this world and our lives into being.

What we need to do as his disciples is to study the life and the ways of Jesus. What we need to do is to make our lives reflect Christian love and discipleship. What we need to do is to learn to be grateful again: grateful to God for life, and grateful to Jesus for teaching us the way to love God, neighbors, and ourselves. What we need to do is to practice genuine gratitude.

How do we do that? What practices can we take on to remind us to be grateful? Can we give thanks for simple things, for the water each morning when we take a shower? Can we give thanks for the rain that falls to water the earth? Can we give thanks to God for speaking this world into being, and for separating the day from the night, and the earth from the sea? Can we give thanks for Jesus as the ultimate luxury? He is, after all, God's crowning gift.

Is it possible to be filled with gratitude for every miracle performed by *our saving God* on this Christmas Day? I sincerely hope it is. Amen.