

## Sermon on Isaiah 35, 10.12.2006

*The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all.  
Amen.*

Dear congregation,

Dr. Bryant Kirkland, former pastor of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City, tells of traveling to preach on the West Coast one winter: "I needed the time on that three hour flight to study and prepare," he said, "so I buckled down and let everyone near me feel the tension 'Don't bother me, I'm a busy man with places to go and work to do'. - A young woman and a toddler slipped into the seat next to mine. I thought, 'This will be difficult,' so I kept a straight face and looked very Presbyterian. It lasted for about six minutes. Pretty soon, this little boy began fussing around. Although I had plenty of work to do, being a Father myself and knowing how difficult it was for this mom to keep her child calm for all those hours on the plane, I couldn't resist, I put my sermon back into the briefcase, picked him up out of the seat and played with him all the way across the country. When we landed in Los Angeles, his mother said to me, 'Thank you for doing that. He lost his father not long ago, and he has no man who plays with him like that. Thank you so very, very much.'" And Dr. Kirkland realized, as he got off the plane and pushed into the crowd, just how much joy and peace that little boy had brought into his own heart, when he least expected it would happen.

Sometimes a child will do that for us. Sometimes a child can get into a heart that has been locked tight for years. Isn't that what Christmas is all about? There is a child who brings every year that kind of joy into millions of hearts.

And naturally we want to feel this joy, Christmas brings us. There is really no one who does not want to be happy. Some people just do not know how to manage to get there. How do we become Christmas inspired people, who feel this joy in their hearts?

Today's sermon text deals with the same question. It is again a text taken from the book of Isaiah. The prophet talks to his people and tries to cheer them up. This is a tough thing to do, because everything is just terrible, they are at the brink of a war; the Assyrians are at the gates of the country and will not be long before the Israelites will be killed or lead into captivity. They realize too late that they had deceived God, neglected him, and wandered away from their faith only to receive the just punishment consisting of war and deportation.

Let us listen to what the prophet wrote in this situation:

*1 The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus 2 it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. 3 Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. 4 Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.' 5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; 6 then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; 7 the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. 8 A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray. 9 No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. 10 And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*

Wherever you look from Jerusalem, you see the desert which is only cut through by the Jordan River. People in this land know what dry land and wilderness is like. The Lebanon was the only place with big trees and a more moderate climate and landscape.

The text sounds like the story of the creation:

*1 The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus 2 it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; 7 the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. 9 No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there.*

But this is a symbol of the return of God, who will make things new, different and who will bring about circumstances which are the best for humans and animals. God can change the world, this is the message here. The desert will blossom the wilderness be fruitful.

Of course, this is a symbol for God's renewing power. But that is not all:

*They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. 3 Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. 4 Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.' 5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; 6 then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. 10 And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*

The weakness shall be taken away from people, they shall receive strength. Fear shall not reign in their hearts but joy. God will come and save you. Joy, singing, gladness will be heard instead of the sighs of the oppressed and fearful. What a nice picture Isaiah paints for his people, and also for us. This would be a Christmas according to our taste, where everything is perfect, nothing which stands in the way of joy and gladness. This truly would be a 'Merry Christmas'. Wouldn't you want this?

The Israelites do not have much to be cheerful about. Their life is not a bed of roses. And we can relate to that. Some of us feel like they are wondering through a desert as well; especially at this time of year, we are very sensitive to all the things which are not good. Most people feel sadness more intensively than at any other times of the year. It is as if Advent and Christmas soften the skin again which we had grown thicker to deal with the problems we face.

But it is God's intent to also make our deserts blossom and bloom. But how do we get there? How do we get ourselves in the right Christmas mood, which is neither depression, nor a faked happiness with which we try to trick ourselves?

It is simple, I think and it is based on two things:

- 1. Let God take care of your life.**
- 2. Go and look for the child in the manger.**

Ok, this sounds either too easy or is not clear enough, so that we really do not know what to do with it. Let me explain it a little further:

**1. Let God take care of your life.** I have often explained the principle: If you are too occupied with your own problems, you see nothing else but your own problems. Isaiah is doing, what we also find in almost every book of the bible: He reminds people of God's presence and power. He can do this because he receives the assurance from God, that in the end he will come and free his people, like he has done countless times before. The timing of the message may have been unexpected; the message as such is not; because this is

again just the realization of God being faithful to his people. Now in the context of this reminder what God can do and will do, there is one phrase which may have surprised us: *God will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense.*

Wait a minute that is not the God we know, right? Would God come and take revenge? We may wonder how this fits in with the God of love. And we might also be tempted to conclude that this is the God of the Old Testament talking, and the God of the New Testament, the Father of Jesus Christ, would never had said that. Now, first of all, the God of the Old Testament is not different from the God of the New Testament. Our understanding has shifted to a more personal approach of God through the preaching and teaching of Jesus Christ, but God is still the same. The only problem is that we do not understand what the word vengeance means in connection with God's actions. So, what does it mean?

1) The tone lies on God's instead of our vengeance. If there is anyone at all who has the right to retaliate then it is God, says Paul this in the letter to the Romans, and the letter to the Hebrews repeats it. It is God's thing not ours. What this means is that we should not take matters in our own hands. I think also that this is the Old Testament way of expressing what forgiveness is, and starting with step one: Let God retaliate, if you think that recompense is necessary! You abstain from it; otherwise the problem with someone else gets bigger instead of smaller. That is step number one. –

2) Dealing with God's vengeance we need to be reminded that God's vengeance is embedded in step number two in the Jewish faith and that is that there is a day of atonement and forgiveness every year: That is Yom Kippur, which was on September 22, this year.

3) From Christian perspective we can add two other things: The advice that, if you can not resolve an issue with someone; get some help and try to have a mediator in the conflict. If that does not help, avoid confrontation. That is step number three.

4) Step four; know that Jesus has forgiven every person.

If you thought that Christmas is the time of year where you can go out and let others know how much they have hurt you and pay them back, think again. Let God take care of it and pray for the resolution of the conflict. Forgive as you have been forgiven.

## **2. Go and look for the child in the manger.**

Let God take care of your life, meaning also be in touch with him. *'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come and save you.'*

If people say that strength is something which comes from the inside, it is wrong. It has to come from the outside first and how it works in our faith is that we need to go and look for God and see ourselves, like the shepherds, and understand how near he has come to us. From a Christian perspective, things can only change and get better in our life, if our way leads us either to Bethlehem or to the open tomb in Jerusalem or from Bethlehem to the open tomb and back on our way. The wise men returned to their home country with a smile on their face; the shepherds were so happy that they told everyone, what they have found; the women and the disciples after they had seen the resurrected Jesus moved on and preached with gladness and did unimaginable things to spread this good news.

This can also happen to us, if we understand who God is and what he does for us. My hope is, that on our way to Bethlehem on which we are right now, scheduled for arrival on the 24<sup>th</sup>, we can leave behind all the baggage we have been carrying with us for such a long time. My hope is that through the experience of a God who comes to save us, we gain some strength in our *weak hands, and feeble knees*. My hope is that we trust the voice saying: *'Be strong, do not fear! I am your God. I will come and save you.'* My hope is also that we return to our lives *with singing; everlasting joy and gladness*, and that all *sorrow and sighing flees away*. That is exactly what Christmas is all about? That the child brings that kind of joy into millions of hearts, also ours. Amen.

*And the Peace of God which passes all understanding, may keep our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*