

“Boundless mercy”

December 21, 2008

Text: *Isaiah 55:1-9, Luke 1:45-55*

I.

Remembering that Advent is a time of waiting and preparation, a Methodist Bishop once said, in an meditation on Advent, that ...

Advent people are people waiting ... yearning ... leaning forward ... standing on tip toe for something better.

His point was: *the future belongs to those who wait with high hope and expectation ... to those who know we are meant for something better.*

For those who are going through tough and stressful financial times, those who have had their homes foreclosed on, who have perhaps lost their job ... those whose retirement security seems to be slipping away; those whose lives are in *upheaval* over *whatever changes* or *personal losses*, listen up!

God is coming! Good News is on the way.

What Christmas says, friends—over and again—is that *the night cannot forever hold back the dawn*. Why? Because our God is a merciful God: kind, compassionate, forgiving, renewing and redeeming ... forever and ever.

Boundless mercy. That’s what God gives us.

II.

In our reading from Isaiah, the prophet speaks about this mercy; just as Mary sings about it her marvelous *Magnificat*.

Ho, said Isaiah, *everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. Incline your ear ... come to me ... listen, so that you may live. ... Return to the LORD so that the Lord may have mercy on you.*

From the beginning of the biblical story, friends, God calls us to life. That’s what God is about. Giving life ... honoring life ... restoring life ... saving life. How many times? As many times as it takes.

God understands our every weakness, our every sadness and sorrow. God comprehends our every set-back and darkness—the many challenges on our plate, the stress that at times overwhelms. That’s why God says, through the prophet: *come to my waters ...*

incline your ear ... listen, so that you may live.

God knows that sometimes we get ourselves locked into some dark places. Some times everywhere we turn seems to be a dead end and we wonder: *how are we going to find our way through?*

Sometimes, try as we might, we can't stop thinking—to the point of believing—that our present reality is all there is. That things will never change. But then, Mary sings and the prophet cries out and, little by little, hope begins to rise up.

Boundless mercy. Again, *The night cannot forever hold back the dawn.*

The dawn comes, friends, in our daring to live today ... beyond yesterday. As Christians and as Advent people, our lives are NOT defined by fatalism or determinism, and certainly not by guilt. None of us is destined in any way to be rejected or a failure ... or to be forever off balance or knocked down.

God is forever merciful and forgiving ... loving and kind ... forever working in our lives *to uplift us* and to *help us see* the power of tomorrow. Tomorrow can help us make sense out of today ... and yesterday. That's because *tomorrow* overflows with HOPE.

In Advent, Christmas has come, even though it is not yet here, because the HOPE of Christmas is alive in the waiting.

Hope changes everything. And God's infinite mercy abounds in the hope.

III.

In South African **Alan Paton's** book, *Cry, the Beloved Country*, a young idealistic South African lawyer, named **Arthur Jarvis**, is killed by the son of South African pastor, Stephen Kumalo. Obviously, this is a tragic unfolding.

As it turns out, **Arthur Jarvis** has just finished writing a book about the need for justice in his very divided and conflicted native land. Meanwhile, when Pastor Kumalo seeks out Arthur Jarvis' father to apologize for his son's awful, violent act, some intriguing events begin to unfold.

While Jarvis' father didn't necessarily share his son's passion for working against the evils of apartheid, in order to try and make sense of his son's life, he begins to immerse himself in his son's book. With a new sense of his son's commitments, the grief-stricken father is able to receive pastor Kumalo in a more kindly manner.

In the ensuing weeks, the elder Jarvis (a man of considerable financial means) embraces a whole new way of dealing with his son's death ... to the point where he commits to helping build a new church for pastor Kumalo's congregation. Beyond that, the

distraught father also offers to build a dam for the local village so the people will have year-round access to fresh water.

All of this, of course, serves to honor his son's memory through acts of kindness, goodness and generosity.

The point of this story for us on this Christmas Sunday is, not only how God and the Holy Spirit are working redemptively in the midst of this tragic situation, but how—with the construction of this new dam—a shock wave of hope rises up throughout this impoverished village.

Suddenly, all kinds of wonderful change are in the air. Throughout the village, people are embracing life with a new spirit. Everywhere, HOPE is in the air.

Soon there will be water for irrigation and they will even be able to raise cattle. And because there will be more than enough food to go around, the young people won't have to rush off to the cities to find work. Clearly, this *anticipated* good news is making a tremendous difference.

And yet, what's interesting about this is that nothing has as yet actually happened. About this, Alan Paton makes the compelling point: ***Although nothing has come yet, something is here already.***

That's Advent. Christmas is already here in the HOPE that is part of the waiting. Good news is on the way. New hope with new possibilities has filled the village air. All about, people are alive with expectation.

IV.

But if we seriously reflect on this, who would've thought? That suddenly generosity would flow from an unlikely source, a new dam would be constructed, and in the blink of an eye everything would change.

Who would've thought?

That God's people, for fifty years, locked in abject isolation and despair in Babylonian Exile; and, now, God's **boundless mercy** opens a way for them to go home—to be restored to Jerusalem and to the land of Judah.

Who would've thought?

That God would come to a humble peasant woman and, through her, make the crooked straight, lift up the lowly, bring down the proud and the rich from their lofty throne, and give hope to every human being—locked in whatever darkness, lost in whatever long night.

Who would've thought?

Always, God's **boundless mercy** is on the move. God's tender hand of kindness and compassion and forgiveness. Why? Because we are meant for something better. God is relentless in nudging us into the light ... into a larger world ... with a larger, more inclusive love.

At times, we might think we're not worthy. We might think it's too late. We might think our lives are too tangled up, that too much has happened; our grief is too deep, our sins too many ... whatever it is.

Forget it! In a sense, it's not about us; it's about God. Because, for God's sake and God's purposes, we're meant for something better. And because of this, God will never relent.

And never forget, we don't know what God has in store for us. Again, listen to Isaiah:

***For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are my ways higher than your ways ... and my thoughts than your thoughts.***

V.

Friends, there's a new energy in the air ... a new expectation and a new hope spreading across our land and even across the planet. I just talked with my sister, Lois, whom many of you know. They just returned from a month in Africa, visiting their son and daughter-in-law in Tanzania and Kenya.

After the Presidential election on November 4th, imagine the new hope and pride that have risen up across the African continent! They were in disbelief at the stories they heard, at the hope they saw in people's hearts.

Together, with new leadership, with new hope and new vision; a vision that welcomes all people—even those who are perhaps most different from us, God will come; and together we will work and strive and build on the best in our traditions.

Ho, everyone who thirsts, says the prophet, come to the waters; for lo, my soul magnifies the Lord, sings Mary. God's boundless mercy is to the ends of the earth.

For many, friends, this can be a tough time of the year. We know that. Particularly, for those of us who have lost loved ones in recent times; for those of us who, for whatever series of reasons, have fallen on hard times ... stressed out, perhaps at home or at work.

But we never know how God can work in our lives; how God can use our every expression of kindness and goodness, of compassion and forgiveness ... our every act of generosity. This is how we feed our hearts and spirits.

Again, Christmas is about God's *boundless mercy*.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

Dr. Jeffrey E. Frantz
Miami Lakes Congregational Church, *United Church of Christ*
6701 Miami Lakeway South
Miami Lakes, FL 33014
On the web at www.mlchurch.com