

A Sign of Hope

A sermon by Rev. Dr. Gregory Young

Presented on Sunday, December 19, 2010

Sermon Prayer:

Oh mighty God, we thank you for our children and for those who work with our children and pray your blessing upon them. We thank you for their eyes of wonder and their energy, the innocence that they bring to our community. And pray that as we surround them with a community of love they will grow in their knowledge and understanding of your ways as we seek to do the same. May your word come to dwell among us and within us. And may your word guide our every step and our every thought that we may bring honor and glory to your holy name.

In Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Sermon:

This week I was reading in the conference digest that comes out three times a week.

It informs us of events that are planned within the boundaries of our conference, largely within the state of New Jersey, but also in the northwest corner of the state it spills over into New York and Pennsylvania. That's why we're known as the Greater New Jersey Conference of the United Methodist Church. And one of the stories that I read is actually one that comes from our denomination. And it was a story about a young woman whose life was transformed because of the faithful giving of the churches throughout the United Methodist Connection. And I'd like to share just a little bit of her story with you as the beginning of our sermon today.

Nicole Lebreun says, "My life was kind of rough." She grew up in the tough South Central part of Los Angeles, California, in a family of seven children. She says, "We got evicted when I was 15 years old, and from then on, I lived in homeless shelters, friends' homes and hotels. When I was a senior in high school, my brother died of a drug overdose, which left me depressed."

The story goes on: Lebreun persevered. She studied music in high school and college, and played saxophone with some of the top musicians, including Ray Charles and Stevie Wonder, and taught music to elementary school children. She also joined Faith United Methodist Church in Los Angeles, where her pastor pushed her to join JustUs Youth in 2005. And that was the program provided by our denomination that transformed her life.

Her involvement in that new ministry opened doors to adventure and growth opportunities through the sponsoring General Board of Global Ministries. She attended the Global Youth Convocation in South Africa in 2006 and helped teach communities in the West African country of Gambia about HIV/AIDS as a Global Justice Volunteer for our denomination in 2008. Then she went to First Grace Church as a summer intern to help with its recovery from Hurricane Katrina. The multiracial church, merged from two congregations, and asked her to return.

Today, Lebreun is a case worker for Hagar House, the church's small women's shelter. She states, "I love it, especially meeting and learning from the women. I've lived in shelters, but some of these women have suffered from domestic abuse and sexual assault. They need a place like this just to be safe."

Lebreun always blends her mission work with her love for music. She took her sax to Gambia and taught music there. Now she plays and helps direct music at First Grace and is studying music education at a nearby college.

She also stays involved in JustUs Youth, helping to lead workshops on youth and young adult ministry at church wide events. Our offering on Human Relations Day which will occur in January partly supports this mission. And all of our apportionment dollars that we give faithfully throughout the year through our weekly giving here at church helps to support programs like this that transform individuals lives. And I think this Sunday in particular is a good Sunday to remember that. To remember the difference we make as a congregation and the difference that we make as United Methodists seeking to share the transforming love of God as we have received it in his son, our savior, Jesus Christ.

Charles de Foucauld, writing in *Meditations of a Hermit*, shares this thought:

“The child Jesus will, perhaps, not give you any sweetness – he reserves that for the weak ones – but his hands will nonetheless be spread to bless you in these [coming] days of Christmastide, and whether you feel it or no, he will pour abundant grace into your soul.” For me the miracle and the blessing of Christmas, the incarnation of God in Jesus, is found in this simple statement by Charles de Foucauld. God comes into this life we live, this flesh and blood existence, regardless of whether or not we know it or even understand it. God, because of who we are and in spite of who we are, comes to save us from ourselves and from the craftiness of evil. God comes in Jesus to pour abundant grace into our souls; into the souls of all humanity. The question is will we receive this most precious gift from God?

Where is it that you most intensely experience the presence of God? Is it when you look into the eyes of your children or your grandchildren? Do you experience God’s presence in your work? In your leisure time? Is it when you sit by the fire place with loved ones, sharing events of the day or stories of the family? Or, is it when you look upon those whose lives have been dashed on the rocks of life and find yourself serving them or witness others serving them? Is it when you see the poor being cared for? Or, when you care for the poor yourself? Where do you experience God’s holy presence in your life and what happens to you when you cannot find it?

As the prophet Isaiah continues to prepare us for the promised gift of a savior that is the question I find myself asking with today’s lessons. What is it that, when I see it or when I experience it, helps me to experience the holy presence of God? Or, looking at it from the situation that King Ahaz found himself in back in the 7 century BCE, how do you find and trust in God’s holy presence when it is nowhere to be seen? It is a bit easier for

us to find and trust in God's presence when all is going well. What happens when everything falls apart? When we find ourselves wondering if there really is a God, or if there is a God, does God really care about me? In fact, you may find yourself in such despair that you begin to wonder why God has it out for you. "What did I do that was so wrong and so terrible that God is cursing me this way?"

Dante captured this state of being so well when he placed these words over the entrance to the gate of Hell, "Abandon hope all ye who enter here." To whom do we turn when all hope is lost? King Ahab had made his decisions for his people. He made those decisions believing that God was leading him and now those decisions were threatening to bring utter destruction from the Syrian army. Ahaz was a king in the Davidic line and God's promise was that there would always be a king of Israel in the line of David. Why was God delaying helping his people and how was God going to protect his people from an invading army?

When the prophet Isaiah asks Ahaz for a sign from God it is intended as a gift from God to restore Ahaz's faith for he had lost all faith. Ahaz's response, however, comes from his lack of faith and his shame in being able to admit that he had lost all faith in God. It was a hollow attempt at piety with the hope that it would hide his disbelief when Ahaz replied "I will not ask and I will not put the Lord to the test." Are these words of extreme faith and devotion to God from a king of David or are they empty, hollow words of piety spoken by one who is all but defeated? When everything in your life falls apart, where do you find hope? Do you, like Ahaz, begin to doubt in God? The founder of Methodism, John Wesley found himself in just such a situation as a young, ordained priest in the Church of England.

Wesley was sent by his church to Savannah, Georgia where he was commissioned to minister to the colonist in Savannah and to convert the Native Americans in Savannah to Christianity. He became more and more

frustrated and discouraged as his ministry met with failure after failure and as his personal life fell apart. The result was that Wesley left Savannah a beaten man ready to surrender his priestly orders. Back in England he shared his story of failure and his intent to quit the ordained ministry with a friend, Peter Boehler. Boehler's advice to the defeated Wesley was not to leave the priesthood but rather, to "Continue to preach faith until you have faith." Seen another way, you might look at this and say, "If life hands you lemons, you have a choice – you can get sour or you can make lemonade." Sometimes all we have to offer God and ourselves is just going through the motions. Sometimes we have to be hypocrites for awhile and speak the words of faith even though we doubt them and are having difficulty living them. And so perhaps Ahaz was saying from a perspective of faith and going through the motions, "I will not ask God; I will not test God."

King Ahaz was in a tough place. He was the king of Israel and a king in the Davidic line. If his faith failed, if his kingship failed, if his people were conquered by the invading armies, then the promise made by God to David would come to an end. What was he to do? In his eyes he had failed miserably and God had failed him and his people miserably. Then comes along the one whom God had anointed to speak on God's behalf, the prophet Isaiah. God wanted Ahaz to believe in Him and in what He was about to do. God did not want Ahaz trusting in himself, God knew that the only way for Ahaz was for him, as king of Israel to believe totally and completely in God. So God, through Isaiah, asks Ahaz to determine a sign that God could offer him so that Ahaz would believe. Would have his faith restored and have his trust in God solidified. Ahaz couldn't do it. I am certain that if we found ourselves in the same circumstances we would respond the same way.

Just as God, offered the Immanuel sign to Ahaz as a sign of hope, so God offered hope to Joseph with the same sign. In learning of Mary's

pregnancy Joseph had a choice to make. The social and religious customs of his people informed Joseph that he should put Mary away quietly – to break their engagement and to leave her and her baby to provide for themselves in a society that viewed unwed mothers and their children as second class citizens. Mary and Jesus would be seen by Joseph and everyone else in Nazareth as a disgrace to their family, to their community and even an abomination to God. They would spend the rest of their lives in disgrace and begging for any scrap that someone might throw their way. This would have been Joseph's logical choice and without God's intervention, Joseph would have seen this as his only choice. The angel, however, just like Isaiah with King Ahaz, offered another choice. Rather than admit defeat, the angel of God offered the Emmanuel sign and promised that God was indeed at work through these events and would offer salvation to His people.

The point of all of this is that if your life is falling apart and you are feeling like a failure, if everything you've hoped and dreamed for has crumbled before your eyes and you think you've been abandoned by God, you need to know that God has not abandoned you. Emmanuel, "God with us" is what was told to Ahaz; Immanuel "God is with us" is what was told to Joseph; and his name is Jesus, which means "God will save." The way God chooses to save humanity is by being with us in the person of Jesus the Messiah and he alone is our hope.

Thanks be to God, Amen.