

Service of Comfort and Remembrance
SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 28, 2021

“COMFORT, GIVE COMFORT TO MY PEOPLE SAYS YOUR GOD.”

AS WE GATHER HERE THIS FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT, TO REMEMBER THOSE OF OUR LOVED ONES WHO HAVE GONE BEFORE US, WE ARE REMINDED THAT ADVENT IS A SEASON OF ANGUISHED WAITING. FOR SO LONG, IT SEEMED THAT GOD HAD FORGOTTEN HIS PEOPLE. SO MUCH OF THE WORLD THEN WAS LOST AND BROKEN. FOR SO MANY, IT WAS TEMPTING TO GIVE UP HOPE.

EVEN TODAY, IT'S EASY TO SEE WHAT IS WRONG AND BROKEN IN OUR WORLD. IT IS A HURTING WORLD, TRYING TO RECOVER FROM DISASTERS, BOTH NATURAL AND MAN-MADE. SINCE THE START OF THIS PANDEMIC, WE HAVE WATCHED AS PEOPLE WE LOVE GET SICK AND DIE, AND OUR HEARTS ARE BROKEN. IN THESE MOMENTS, IT IS HARD TO BE SURROUNDED BY FESTIVE DECORATIONS, CHEERY HOLIDAY MUSIC AND MERRY-MAKING.

I REMEMBER MY OWN SEASON OF PAIN DURING THE MONTH LEADING UP TO CHRISTMAS, WHEN A LONG-AWAITED CHILD I CARRIED FOR 8 MONTHS, NO LONGER HAD A HEART-BEAT. GOING TO CHURCH AND LISTENING TO THE WORDS ABOUT THE GIFT OF A CHILD WHO WOULD SAVE US ALL MADE ME KEENLY AWARE THAT WE WERE A FAMILY WHOSE ARMS WERE NEWLY EMPTY. I CHOKED ON THE WORDS TO JOY TO THE WORLD, BECAUSE AT THAT TIME, THERE SIMPLY WAS NO JOY IN MY OWN HEART.

EVERY YEAR AS WE GET CLOSER TO ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS, I CAN'T HELP BUT BE REMINDED OF THIS SORROWFUL ANNIVERSARY. DURING THESE TIMES, IT CAN BE SO TEMPTING TO TURN INWARD, TO BE THE PEOPLE WHO WALK IN DARKNESS.

I AM SURE THAT MANY OF YOU WILL BE FAMILIAR WITH C.S. LEWIS, AUTHOR OF 'THE LION, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE'.

LEWIS WAS GOOD FRIENDS WITH J.R.R. TOLKIEN, AUTHOR OF 'LORD OF THE RINGS', AND HE WAS A CHRISTIAN; A FOLLOWER OF JESUS CHRIST. WHAT YOU MAY NOT KNOW IS THAT AFTER THE DEATH OF HIS WIFE HE WROTE A SHORT BOOK CALLED 'A GRIEF OBSERVED.' HE WAS TRYING TO MAKE SENSE OF THE VARIETY OF DIFFERENT THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS THAT HE WAS EXPERIENCING.

EARLY ON IN THE BOOK HE WROTE THIS: "I SEE PEOPLE, AS THEY APPROACH ME, TRYING TO MAKE UP THEIR MINDS WHETHER THEY'LL 'SAY SOMETHING ABOUT IT' OR NOT. I HATE IT IF THEY DO, AND IF THEY DON'T" (P.11).

HE CONTINUES BY SAYING THAT "THE ACT OF LIVING IS DIFFERENT ALL THROUGH. HER ABSENCE IS LIKE THE SKY, SPREAD OVER EVERYTHING."

AS THE DAYS AND WEEKS WENT BY C. S. LEWIS WROTE THIS: "I SEE THE ROWAN BERRIES REDDENING AND DON'T KNOW FOR A MOMENT WHY THEY, OF ALL THINGS, SHOULD BE DEPRESSING. I HEAR A CLOCK STRIKE AND SOME QUALITY IT ALWAYS HAD BEFORE HAS GONE OUT OF THE SOUND.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE WORLD TO MAKE IT SO FLAT, SHABBY, WORN-OUT LOOKING? THEN I REMEMBER" (P. 31).

THERE IS NO SIMPLE ANSWER TO HANDLING GRIEF. WE MISS OUR LOVED ONES DESPERATELY. WE LOVE THEM ENDLESSLY. WE WILL ALWAYS LOVE THEM DEARLY, AND SO THE FACT OF THEIR ABSENCE WILL NOT GO AWAY.

WE GATHER DURING THIS TIME AND IN THIS PLACE TO REMEMBER THE REPEATED MESSAGE THROUGHOUT THE STORY ABOUT CHRIST'S BIRTH. IT IS THIS:

"DON'T BE AFRAID!"

1. WHEN THE ANGEL TOLD ZECHARIAH HE WAS TO BE THE FATHER OF JOHN THE BAPTIST, HE DECLARED:

“DO NOT BE AFRAID, ZECHARIAH; YOUR PRAYER HAS BEEN HEARD. YOUR WIFE ELIZABETH WILL BEAR YOU A SON, AND YOU ARE TO GIVE HIM THE NAME JOHN.”
LUKE 1:13

2. WHEN THE ANGEL VISITED JOSEPH, HE TOLD HIM:

“DO NOT BE AFRAID TO TAKE MARY HOME AS YOUR WIFE, BECAUSE WHAT IS CONCEIVED IN HER IS FROM THE HOLY SPIRIT.” MATTHEW 1:20

3. WHEN THE ANGEL TOLD MARY HE STARTED WITH THE SAME 4 WORDS:

"DO NOT BE AFRAID, MARY, YOU HAVE FOUND FAVOR WITH GOD. YOU WILL BE WITH CHILD AND GIVE BIRTH TO A SON, AND YOU ARE TO GIVE HIM THE NAME JESUS." (LUKE 1:30-31)

4. AND WHEN THE ANGELS APPEARED TO THE SHEPHERDS IN THE FIELDS, THEY TOLD THEM

"DO NOT BE AFRAID. I BRING YOU GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY THAT WILL BE FOR ALL THE PEOPLE. TODAY IN THE TOWN OF DAVID A SAVIOR HAS BEEN BORN TO YOU; HE IS CHRIST THE LORD." LUKE 2:10-11

AGAIN AND AGAIN AND AGAIN, GOD TOLD HIS PEOPLE – “DON’T BE AFRAID.”

BUT WHY SHOULDN’T I BE AFRAID? MY LIFE IS CHANGED NOW, SAD AND SORROWFUL.

WHY SHOULDN’T I BE AFRAID?

BECAUSE WE HAVE RECEIVED “GOOD NEWS THAT SHALL BE FOR ALL PEOPLE”.

AND, SIMEON SAID THE SAME THING. WHEN HE SAW THE CHRIST CHILD, HE DECLARED HE WOULD BE “A LIGHT FOR REVELATION TO THE GENTILES AND FOR GLORY TO YOUR PEOPLE ISRAEL." LUKE 2: 32

THE PROMISE IS THAT THE LIGHT OF GOD WILL BREAK THROUGH OUR DARKNESS, JUST AS SURELY AS THE BABE BORN ON CHRISTMAS BROKE THROUGH THE CHAOS OF THE WORLD. GOD CAME TO LIFE SO THAT WE MAY HAVE LIFE ETERNAL.

WE GATHER HERE TODAY TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT OUR PAIN IS REAL. WE ACKNOWLEDGE THAT DEATH HAS ITS PLACE IN THE WORLD, BUT IT IS NOT A PLACE OF TRIUMPH. DEATH HAS BEEN SWALLOWED UP IN VICTORY. BECAUSE OF THE LOVE GOD HAS FOR US. THE LOVE THAT GOD HAS FOR US IS STEADFAST AND ENDURES FOREVER. AND THE LOVE WE HAVE FOR THOSE WE MOURN CANNOT BE EXTINGUISHED BY DEATH.

AS A FAMILY OF FAITH, AND BECAUSE OF OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD AND ONE ANOTHER, THOUGH WE WAIT – EVEN IN ANGUISH, EVEN IN DARKNESS – WE DO NOT WAIT OR SUFFER ALONE. IT WAS INTO THIS DARK WORLD THAT CHRIST WAS BORN. IT WAS IN THE MIDST OF DEATH AND DESTRUCTION THAT A CHILD CAME SO THAT WE MAY HAVE LIFE. IMMANUEL, GOD WITH US, CAME DOWN TO EARTH TO ACCOMPANY US IN OUR JOY AND IN OUR SORROW. OUR PAIN AND DARKNESS. LET THE LIGHT OF CHRIST, SHINING IN YOUR DARKEST NIGHTS BE A SIGN OF THE PEACE AND HOPE, AND YES, EVEN JOY THAT GOD WILL BRING US ON THAT DAY WHEN PAIN AND DEATH AND MOURNING WILL BE NO MORE.