

Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11  
John 1: 6-9, 19-28  
Creekside COB  
December 14, 2008  
*Advent 3*

## **“The Restoring Face”**

**As Christmas draws near, people become wary of pastors. Even church folks, it seems, extend the boundary of their comfort zone with the pastor as Christmas approaches.**

**Whenever I’m told, “Now don’t take this personally,” it’s a guarantee something will be said that I *will take personally*. An old friend said to me, “*Don’t take this personally* but I’m sick of you preachers trashing Christmas.” I replied, “I’ve been accused of lots of things, but trashing Christmas isn’t one of them.” “You know what I mean,” he said. “You guys bellar about how awful it is that Christmas has become unabashedly secularized, paganized, and commercialized.”**

**In just a *slightly* defensive tone I replied, “So? What’s *wrong* with that? We get paid big bucks to say what people don’t want to hear. Christmas competition makes it tough to hear the truth, so back off! We’re trying to keep the Holy Day from getting whittled down to a whimpy, vague, “*Happy Holiday!*”**

**“Here’s how I see it,” my friend said. “What harm does glitz and glitter pose? Why begrudge people the fun of giving and getting gifts? What’s wrong with feeling good about dropping a couple of bucks in the Salvation Army kettle? Is it a sin to sing with Bing on *White Christmas* or belt out a rousing chorus of *Deck the Halls*? Why not be “*nicer than normal*” to the waitress, or tip the kid bagging your groceries? Is it a crime to be more gracious and kind at Christmas? So what if the goodwill only lasts a day? One day is better than no day.”**

**My friend had a point, but not much a point-- not when you consider that Christmas marks *the* moment when God ripped open the heavens, descended into our dark world and put on a human face; not when you understand that being a Christian means keeping on the lookout for that face, and receiving God's grace, and running the race of discipleship your whole life long.**

**At the start of Advent I said that God's face is hidden. Sometimes God comes to us as a comforting face. Today we'll consider God's *restoring face*. It isn't the *baby face* of the Christmas boy. God's restoration work isn't for a day or a season. Here is how the Gospel of John describes it in Eugene Peterson's, *The Message*:**

***The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish (John 1: 14).***

**My meditation on Christmas Eve is titled, "*God Has An Address.*" It is the theme of John 1. The Spirit clothed itself in a human being, and made his home with us. The name on the mailbox says, "*Emmanuel.*"**

**Psalm 126 is one of today's lectionary readings. Here it is in the NRSV:**

***When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,  
we were like those who dream.  
Then our mouth was filled with laughter,  
and our tongue with shouts of joy;  
then it was said among the nations,  
'The LORD has done great things for them.'  
The LORD has done great things for us,  
and we rejoiced.***

***Restore our fortunes, O LORD,  
like the watercourses in the Negeb.  
May those who sow in tears***

*reap with shouts of joy.  
Those who go out weeping,  
bearing the seed for sowing,  
shall come home with shouts of joy,  
carrying their sheaves.*

In your Bible you will see a note above the Psalm that says, “*A Pilgrim Song,*” or, “*A Song of Ascents.*” Psalm 126 wasn’t sung by an individual. It was corporate. It was the people’s song. It was sealed in Israel’s memory and sung on the journey to Jerusalem for special feasts. It was a “homecoming” song. The past two Sundays I’ve said that Isaiah spoke to Israel’s longing for release from exile in Babylon. With the defeat of Babylon by Persia, that day came and Israel returned to the Promised Land. They danced and sang all the way home.

But when they arrived there was nothing to come home to. If I may play on the Christina Rosseti poem we just sang, “*Stones had fallen, stone on stone, stone on stone, in ransacked Israel, long, long ago.*”

The longing for home is something that’s always with us. But when we couple Christmas with the longing to go home to the way it used to be, we burden Christmas with the weight of our expectations. The family will all be there. We’ll sit around the fireplace and sing carols. The *real tree* will be decorated with the old ornaments -- including the ones you made in second grade. Aunt Jane will bring her candied yams and Grandma will do the traditional honey glazed ham.

We want Christmas to conform to our memories. But after being together several hours with the family, you remember why you moved three hours away. The sibling rivalry is still there. The

old stresses and strains are the same. The problem you had before Christmas will wait for your return. We want Christmas to be perfect, but it can't be.

Seeing what was left of their homeland, they were nearly undone. Still, they kept singing. "Let's do 126 -- again!" *They sang it year on year, year on year.* They were confident God would help and protect them. Isaiah said:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because the Lord has called me to preach good news to the poor and heal the brokenhearted...to announce freedom to the captives...to comfort all who mourn...to care for the needs of all who mourn in Zion and give them roses instead of ashes, messages of joy instead of news of doom. Rename them "Oaks of Righteousness" planted by God to display his glory. They'll restore the old ruins and raise a new city out of the wreckage. They'll take the rubble left behind and make it new."*

The Spirit of the Lord wasn't just upon Isaiah, John the Baptist or Jesus. The Spirit wants to land on us because the ranks of *the poor in wealth and poor in spirit* are swelling. There is an epidemic of broken hearts. People are drowning in doom and desperate for hope and encouragement.

The United States has the largest prison population of any nation in the world-- 2.2 million people. China is second with 1.5 million, but the population of China is four times greater than the United States! Most people in our country are behind bars for drug related crimes. In Isaiah's day, prisons weren't filled with those who committed crimes. Most of them were in debt.

**We don't incarcerate people mired in debt... not yet, anyway. But they're still imprisoned. Sue mentioned a couple that owes \$90,000 in credit card debt. They had forty-four credit cards!**

**Check the spirit hovering over you. Is it the spirit of complacency or commitment? Are you anguished about others, or apathetic? Is it the spirit of, "I've served my term, call someone else," or "Where he leads me I will follow," When people look into your face, who is reflected in it?**

**Popular Christmas songs are so nostalgic. They are endearing because they touch our longing for the days to be as they used to be. The song that is packed with more nostalgia than all the others is, "*I'll be Home For Christmas*" (the Bing Crosby version).**

*I'll be home for Christmas; you can count on me.  
Please have snow and mistletoe  
And presents on the tree.*

*Christmas Eve will find me  
Where the love-light gleams.  
I'll be home for Christmas  
If only in my dreams.*

**We won't be going to Bethlehem for Christmas. Bethlehem isn't home. The memory of home is not home. Home is beyond concern for our survival and self-interests. The Lord who restored Israel is the Lord whose face we behold at Christmas. He is still in the restoration business. Home is where Jesus is, and Jesus is where the people need him.**