

I. Intro.: Late sermon title – **Have yourself a crummy little Christmas**

A. You heard that right

1. Not that I would actually wish that upon you ... not at all ... but it does give you a glimpse into my own experience this year

2. All in all, I'd have to say I've had a crummy Christmas ... let me tell you why:

a) 3 weeks ago I made a quick trip out to see my parents in KS after mom had hip replacement surgery and we saw alarming declines in my dad's health

b) Just after coming home, I learned that a cancerous brain tumor was causing dad's disorientation and that he chose not to have surgery for it, so he joined her in a healthcare room for the remainder of his days

c) Only four days later dad went into renal failure & died peacefully, with mom, & my sister and brother-in-law nearby

When I last saw dad alive on the 9th of Dec. in the hospital, I squeezed his hand & promised him I'd be back to see him in 2 weeks or so. I kept my promise but less than a week later, he left us & went to be with Jesus.

I know this homecoming is the best Xmas present dad ever got, but it was not "the most wonderful time of the year" for me

The next time I touched his hand, it was cold & stiff

d) Two days before Xmas, I was sitting in my home congregation's sanctuary, still decorated with flowing Advent visuals, but I wasn't there to welcome baby Jesus. As family, we sang & smiled & cried our way thru a goodbye to a quiet man who spent 85 years serving God & others.

e) On the 24th, instead of a candlelight service with you all here, instead of making homemade donuts, as is our family's Xmas Eve tradition, we were finishing the long drive home from KS

f) Janette & I didn't even have enough time to get each other any gifts .. like I said, it was a crummy Christmas

B. This is not meant as a literal sob story for your sympathy ... nor just a pastor's way to do his own therapy with 300 captive listeners ...

1. On a Sunday when the theme is the mystery of God's dwelling with us in distress, I think I can relate pretty well to both mystery & distress this year!

2. And unfortunately, I know I'm not the only one who's ever had themselves a crummy little Christmas
3. But I also know one piece of good news, perhaps the best good news of all if you, too, have struggled this Christmas:

- a) The saving reality of God birthing new things in our distressed world is not limited by whether or not you & I had a "holly jolly Christmas"!
- b) Cindy said it right on with something in her sermon last week: *God is at work in the orderly and in the disruptive experiences of life.*

II. So this morning let's look for signs of this God at work, even when Christmas comes amid distress

A. The 2 Scripture passages I had read for us, struck me in contrasting ways as I studied them recently

1. Isa. 63:7-9 at first sounds very upbeat, especially when we hear the words about God, "he became their savior in all their distress"

- a) But taking a closer look at the passage was not so encouraging for me. This is the beginning of a larger section that goes thru chapter 64 of Isaiah.

The entire passage is an extended communal lamentation, even though the 1st part hardly sounds like a lament

Those inspiring words of promise that Yahweh is Israel's savior in all their distress get tempered a lot when you read thru the rest of the section

- b) This part of Isa. was composed not long after Jerusalem was destroyed and the Jews were deported to Babylon nearly 600 years before Jesus

This long section declares faith in God who did good works in the past, yet God is notably silent in chapters 63 & 64 when the people bring their complaints

In this Xmas season, when we rightly recount the gracious deeds of the LORD, listen to the anguished questions that the people ask of God when their world is crumbling around them:

(a) *"Where is the one who put within [us] his holy spirit ... the one who led [us] thru the depths?"* (v. 11 & 13)

(b) *"Where are your zeal & your might? The yearning of your heart and your compassion? They are withheld from me."* (v. 15)

And to these painful questions, God's immediate response is ... nothing.

Not exactly a resounding confidence-builder in the moments of their great anxiety!

2. Now in contrast, our reading from Hebrews 2 does not have a God who is silent in the face of people under distress

a) This passage focuses our attention on God's salvation coming in a special way to us thru Jesus the Messiah

b) Here the special emphasis is on Jesus sharing our flesh & blood.

v. 17 says he became like us in every respect ... He was fully human! He knew our sufferings!

What good news for us, that we can't say, "Well a holy & righteous God in heaven can't relate to my sufferings down here!"

Every tear, every torment, every pain, every temptation, every loss we've experienced: in Jesus, God has felt it too!

3. On this point, I ask you to please indulge me one little bunny trail:

a) At this Christmas when I've just lost my father, a time of year when we always hear about Mary & Joseph, I have to wonder, "Whatever happened to Joseph after Jesus' childhood?"

b) In the adult ministry of Jesus in the Bible, Joseph is never mentioned. Scholars have mostly assumed that Joseph died before Jesus began his ministry @ age 30

c) As Janette led the children in a few wondering questions, I also wonder ... I wonder things like,

What griefs did Jesus go thru when he lost his dad?

Was it that loss which helped form him into a Savior who became like his brothers & sisters in every respect?

Besides his terrible crucifixion, what kinds of testings & sufferings enabled Jesus to help the rest of us who are also being tested?

(a) Perhaps it was the testing of seeing the pain of loss on Mary's face when Joseph died?

(b) Or maybe it was the testing of following his own inner call to traveling ministry instead of staying home & providing for her as the oldest son?

d) On this Christmas Sunday, these are my wonderings about the savior who shared our sufferings

B. So I just introduced us briefly to these 2 Scripture texts with differing tones to them.

1. As I read them, I saw a certain Christmas movement ... a movement from despair to cautious hope, even when suffering abounds ...

2. It goes from a vague unsettling faith in a God who is silent when we suffer, to a more reassuring yet honest faith in a Jesus who is able to save us precisely because he suffered as we do

3. It's a movement toward a faith that can live with ambiguities, with delayed answers from God or even lack of all the answers.

III. But more important than seeing this movement in the Bible passages ... is seeing this movement in you, in me, in us as worshipers & followers of this weak-yet-strong Savior

A. After the crummy Xmas I've had, the Q is "Can I eventually live into the week after Xmas, drawing more from the Hebrews 2 reality than from the exile reality of Isa. 63?"

1. If you too have had sort of a crummy Xmas, can you find your way from the despairing questions toward the reassurance of hope that this suffering Savior can still bring?

2. I think the answer is "yes, we can" but it's not an answer broadcast loudly or blazoned in neon lights & large letters.

B. When Xmas comes amidst our distress, its meaning is not to be found in pasting artificial joy over top of our tears ...

1. Xmas in distressing times does not come by plastering lovely Thomas Kincaid images over the gray experiences of life

2. The meaning of Xmas does not come in somehow putting the painful crummy stuff out of mind for a season, or distracting ourselves with parties and festive holiday music

3. The mystery of God's dwelling in our distress comes in the realization that we are not alone in these dark realities

a) Whatever suffering & distress we feel, Jesus felt it too! He shared this vulnerability, this breakable heart

b) Of course I agree that the beauty & the divine genius of Xmas IS to be found in the abundant life and the victory we have over death which the arrival of Jesus made possible

c) But Christmas is more than just God dramatically offering us a ticket to heaven after we die ...

C. To use a big theological word Christmas is about "incarnation"

1. It's about a divinity who didn't stay removed from us up in heaven but valued us enough to become one of us down here

2. When distress hangs around @ Christmas time, sometimes the most comforting things for us are not the high visions of stars and angels or abstract words like glory and salvation from sin.
3. Sometimes the most comforting things are incarnational images:
 - a) A crying, shivering baby savior, who cannot yet meet his own needs
 - b) Or a grief-stricken adult Jesus building his own father's casket
4. The One described as our "savior in all our distress" is today still continuing that saving work ... but He often comes quietly & vulnerably, without fanfare, kind of like God did some 2K years ago
 - a) Despite my crummy Christmas, I have also experienced this same divine work in the past few weeks.
 - b) How have I experienced the "Savior in all my distress"?

In the simple concrete gestures of dozens of cards, notes, flowers & gifts from fellow Xian pilgrims

In the hugs of others who have also traveled journeys of grief

And most of all, in the sobering realization that, despite all our orderly structured lives and our Plans B,C, and D for when things go wrong, our ultimate security comes from God, not from the earthly people & stuff we so heavily depend on!

IV. Conclusion

A. Friends, no matter what kind of Xmas you're having, remember that *in all our distress, God is still our savior thru Jesus the Messiah*

B. If Xmas is tough for you this year & you need a relevant Bible memory verse to hang onto, take Heb. 2:18 with you

1. Rather than focusing on a manger scene that feels a million miles away from your own reality, let Immanuel dwell with you thru these words ...
2. *Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.*

C. This ... is the beauty of the incarnation. Amen.