

## **“A Word Out of Place”**

**December 10, 2016 – Third Sunday in advent**

**Caldwell Presbyterian Church**

**Rev. John Cleghorn**

### **Isaiah 35:1-10**

Ten years ago I traveled to the nation of Zambia in the heart of Africa. At age 76, my mother announced to me that she was going with a group from her church in Atlanta. I appointed myself her chief bag carrier and went along.

If you have been to Africa, you know of its stark contrasts. On one hand, Africa still reflects the influences by the destructive forces of capitalist colonialism, which robbed its beautiful people of self-determination for generation upon generation.

The church mission trip mom and I went on was designed to help. We went to learn more about the crisis of AIDS and how it was orphaning babies by the tens of thousands. The trip also included organizing a soccer tournament for high school girls, an act of empowerment of those amazing female spirits who are so often in the shadow of their male counterparts in African culture.

That's where the contrast came in. The trip was bittersweet. Bitter to see the poverty so many lived in. But sweet in an altogether unexpected way. Sweet and uplifting to see the buoyant spirit of the Zambian people, even in the face of their hardship. At every school we visited and during the soccer tournament, we were changed by the joyous spirit of the people, their happy zest for life, their resilient spirituality.

Especially the children. Nothing compared to the smiling faces and unstoppable laughter of the children. As our scripture last week said, “hope abounds” in Africa even amid hardship.

So it was all the more jarring to see one particular sight while out driving in Lusaka, the capital city of Zambia. We came to a stop at a busy intersection and waited for a long stop light. Just outside the car window, I saw a huddle of children and youth in a makeshift concrete encampment under a bridge. They seemed to range in age from about 8 to mid-teens, all boys. Some begged in traffic. But they were not the ones burned into my memory that day.

Off to the side, other boys sat sniffing small Coca-Cola bottles. The bottles didn't contain soft drink, but gasoline. Unable to put food in their stomachs, these boys instead sat sniffing gas, which put them in a toxic trance that distracted them from their hunger pains. Their bodies were down to skin and bones, their eyes were glazed over in a

distant stare, their brains already damaged by the fumes they turned to for relief. They wouldn't last much longer. They would be out of their misery soon enough.

Those few minutes at that traffic light stick with me still, as much as the other ten days we spent learning how to support the hope, progress and the innate, joyous resilience of the African people. That one sight of those pitiful, suffering boys seemed out of place, and that's why it sticks with me. Even though I knew the struggles of the continent on an intellectual basis, that one unexpected sight jarred me into empathizing with that struggle on an altogether deeper level.

That's what happens when we encounter something that seems out of place, something that catches us unaware. That's how God works sometimes, stopping us in our tracks when we aren't looking. God gets our attention that way. At such moments, God has a way of speaking to us with particular clarity.

In moments like those, we are called to ask: What is God doing? What are we to do when God gives us a word out of place?

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Today's reading from the prophet Isaiah is such a word. That's the conclusion of Biblical scholars. Many experts who know the book of Isaiah and its historical context believe that chapter 35 may well belong in another part of this major prophecy.

Maybe it's there – out of place – to get our attention.

The prophecy of Isaiah is actually not one continuous work, but rather two distinct works from two different eras in the life of God's people separated by about 150 years. One, known as First Isaiah, is from a time when God's people were facing an imminent attack from a powerful outside force; another, known as Second Isaiah, is from a period when God's people had been defeated and sent into exile, separated from their homeland and all that was dear to them.

Today's reading from chapter 35 of Isaiah, many say, is out of place. It seems to speak to the time when God's people were in exile. It offers a word of hope, symbolized by images of a flower in the desert and a highway of deliverance in the middle of the wilderness. But it is placed in a section of Isaiah that isn't thought to be from that time period.

In Isaiah 35, God seems to speak out of time and out of turn. That begs us to ask: What is God up to when he appears out of place, out of order? What are we supposed to learn when God zigs just as we zag? When God gives us a word that doesn't seem to fit

what we see around us, is God perhaps trying to get our attention with a special sense of urgency?

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Today's bulletin cover shows another stark contrast, a young boy making his way through the rubble of what is left of the Syrian city of Aleppo. As we know from the news, the Russian-backed Syrian army is in the process of trying to take back Aleppo from rebel forces that attempted to overthrow the strong-arm government there.

As the photo shows, the Syrians are attacking with a willful blindness, not caring whether civilians are in the way. So, hundreds of civilians have died in the onslaught. Desperate negotiations are underway to end this madness.

But we don't have to go as far as Aleppo or Zambia, Africa, to see things that just shouldn't be, things that are out of place, things that violate God's design for a kingdom where peace reigns and our earth's resources are equally shared, so no little boys and girls go hungry.

Last week, along with other pastors, I was included on your behalf in a meeting of the leaders of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Opportunity Task Force. This effort formed three years ago after a national study found that Charlotte has the least upward economic mobility of all the major cities in the U.S. In other words, if you are poor in Charlotte, it's harder to get out of poverty here than any other major city. You've heard about this report from this pulpit before.

So why do I bring it up again today? I bring it up because the briefing we heard this week focused on children. That task force began with the question of what most helps a child in poverty and worked from there. No surprise that the solutions will take up to 20 years to reverse the dire state of the poor in our city, about the time it takes for a child born today to become a healthy, safe, self-sustaining and productive citizen.

It is children who are most impacted by the factors of Charlotte's poverty, they told us. Children suffer most from our city's racially segregated neighborhoods. Children suffer most from the lack of early childhood development and education. Children suffer most from instable families and unwanted pregnancies. Children suffer most from the lack of social capital among our poorest and most under-privileged populations.

Children suffer most because all of these factors determine the trajectories of their lives. All of these factors dictate whether that child can make it out of poverty in Charlotte or not.

I mention this report because a child born into intractable poverty is out of place in God's vision for this world. In the coming months, we will see a lot of energy across our city to help solve these challenges. That includes the city's houses of faith. You, Caldwell church, are already helping in many ways. I have no doubt that we will listen even more deeply for new opportunities to make an even bigger difference in the lives of our city's children.

Why? Because it is simply out of place when a child in Charlotte, any child, is not given a fair shot and an equal chance, the same chance that every other child in Charlotte has. But we know that is not the case today. And we know, as people of faith, that is not the way of the kingdom of God.

We know that God holds a special place for children. We know that a child left to sniff gas in Africa to take his mind off his empty belly or a child dodging bombs in Aleppo or a child born into the prison of deep and unshakeable poverty is simply out of place.

Perhaps that is why God sometimes speaks out of turn. Perhaps that is why God sometimes gives us a word out of place. Because we can get too accustomed to seeing the injustices around us. If the empty belly is not ours or our child's, if the bombs that are being dropped are not on our neighborhoods but those half-way around the world, if the substandard classroom is not one our child sits in but someone else's child, if the food desert that leads to malnutrition is in some other neighborhood – when that is the case, we can lose sight of our neighbor and our obligation to our neighbor.

Maybe God gives us a word out of place to jar us out of our complacency, to rattle and shake us a bit so that we pay closer attention. Maybe God gives us a promise of a flower in the desert or a highway out of the wilderness because we don't even realize we are the ones in exile.

Maybe it is a spiritual exile. Maybe ours is not a real poverty but a poverty of living. Maybe it is a complacency of faith, a faith that we are happy to let sit on the shelf, like an elf on our bookcase at Christmas, something we know is there but doesn't ask too much of us.

Or maybe our exile is all too real. Maybe we feel exiled in relationship. We feel separated from life or from those closest to us. Or maybe we just feel separated from God. And so the promise of a highway out of exile is just what we need. At times, all of us need desperately to hear Isaiah's assurance that the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped, that the lame shall leap like a deer, whether in body or in spirit, and that the tongue shall break forth in beautiful song.

Maybe these ancient words that popped up out of place in the scroll of Isaiah are really the words out of place we need to hear, because all we can see otherwise is too dark and too hopeless.

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In this season of Advent, we wait for the one the prophets spoke of, the messiah to come. Whatever our circumstance, as with the children of Israel to whom Isaiah spoke, God is there with us in our waiting, even in our exile. God doesn't leave us where we are. No, in those days, God makes a highway of hope and redemption. God pays the ransom and promises deliverance, as Isaiah prophesied and as God did through Christ Jesus.

In 1943, the great leader of the true church in Germany, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, sat in prison, captive of the Nazis. He surely knew his fate. He would be put to death for his attempt to rid the world of Adolph Hitler.

Surely a word of hope would be out of place for anyone in that circumstance. Yet as Bonhoeffer marked his days of Advent waiting that year, he penned a letter to his fiancé. It was, of all things, a letter of celebration, a word out of place if there ever was one.

Out of his unshakeable faith, Bonhoeffer joyously awaited the celebration of the birth of the Christ child, a child himself out of place, the Almighty God come into the world in the form of a helpless baby swaddled in a cow stall of a nursery.

Bonhoeffer penned these words of hope and celebration to his beloved from his death row prison cell:

*Be brave for my sake, dearest Maria, even if this letter is your only token of my love this Christmas-tide. We shall both experience a few dark hours – why should we disguise that from each other? . . . And then, just when everything is bearing down on us to such an extent that we can scarcely withstand it, the Christmas message comes . . . No evil can befall us; whatever men may do to us, they cannot but serve the God who is secretly revealed as love and rules the world and our lives.*

My Caldwell friends, in a world where too much is out of place, out of order according to God's kingdom, strive to be patient, as our scripture from James commends. Be patient until the coming of the Lord. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.

Amen.