**Longing for Christ**

Several years ago, one of my favourite newspaper columnists[[1]](#footnote-1) wrote about how she loved going to Church on Christmas Eve, especially if there was a light snowfall that night. She wrote about how she loved to hear the nativity story and sing the Christmas carols familiar from her childhood. She wrote about how she would line up with the other members of the congregation, and kneel before the altar, decorated with poinsettias, and receive Holy Communion. She wrote about all this, and then ended her column wondering why she bothered, because even though she had grown up in the Church, she had long ago stopped going to Church, because she didn’t believe a word of what was said in Church on Christmas Eve, or any other day for that matter.

What she loved was the ritual, the familiarity of the story, and the picture-perfect Christmas card scene of a moonlight night, with lots of bright stars and snow. For her, there was no sense that the ritual, or the story, could mean any more than a reminder of a simpler time in her life. What she loved, and these I hasten to add are my words and not hers, what she loved was the nostalgia of Christmases long ago.

Nostalgia can be a wonderful thing. Certainly, I often get lost in daydreams of other, simpler times and places in my life. I have great fun remembering how things once were, or at least how I remember they once were. But nostalgia, as is clear from my newspaper columnist, and my own experience, is not the same as faith, and faith isn’t about being nostalgic. As people of faith, we are not longing for some imagined time when life was simpler, when the ritual was comforting, when the story was familiar, and you didn’t need a book or a leaflet to sing the hymns. No, as people of faith, what we are longing for is not some imagined time when life will be simpler, but a promised time when God’s reign of peace and judgement, salvation and light will be fulfilled.

As Christians, we long for that time that when the promises of God will be fulfilled.

*Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; Shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all you heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgements against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.*[[2]](#footnote-2)

The promise of Christmas is not that our life will become a Hallmark movie, but that God, the king of Israel, the Lord, *will be in our midst* to rescue us from disaster, and turn away our enemies.

*I will deal with all your oppressors … and I will save the lame … gather the outcast ..., change [your] shame into praise…. I will bring you home….[[3]](#footnote-3)*

Who that is lame, an outcast, full of shame, and far from home, does not long to be healed, forgiven, and brought home? Who does not want to be rejoiced over with gladness, and renewed in God’s love?[[4]](#footnote-4)

Just as those who are lame long to leap, so we long for God’s promised reign of peace and justice, and salvation, not because we are nostalgic for simpler times, but because we know our need. We know our need for God’s promised peace. We know our need for God’s promised justice. We know our need for God’s promised salvation. We know our need to be rescued, protected, and brought home.

Being a Christian is not about being nostalgic but knowing our need. We know our need, and we know that we cannot find it, fix it or make it, on our own. Not only do we know our need to be rescued, protected, and brought home, but we know that we cannot do that on our own, it must be brought, found, made, and given to us.

And that is what John the Baptist points us to today.

Just before our gospel lesson we hear:

*as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,
‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
“Prepare the way of the Lord,
   make his paths straight.
5 Every valley shall be filled,
   and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
   and the rough ways made smooth;
6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” ’[[5]](#footnote-5)*

John has come into the world, not to restore to us simpler times; not to make us nostalgic; not to make a Hallmark movie of our lives, but so that we can *see the salvation of God.* And this *salvation* comes to us in the Messiah.

*As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16John answered all of them by saying, ‘I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’[[6]](#footnote-6)*

This is the promise of God: not that he will make life simpler, but that God will save us, and gather us into his granary.

During Advent, we look forward to a baby being born at Christmas, and who is not nostalgic about the birth of a baby? But what we long for, is to be gathered into God’s kingdom, not by a baby, but by a saviour.

It has been said, if you don’t know your need of salvation, you don’t need a saviour. If we don’t know that we are lost, how can we know we need to be found? If we don’t know we are sick or broken, how can we know we need to be healed? If we don’t know we need to forgive or be forgiven, how can we know we love or are loved? If we don’t know our need, how can we know we need a saviour?

It’s easy to be nostalgic at Christmas, and many are. I know I am. It’s not so easy to admit that I need something. That I need rescuing, even if it embarrasses me. That I need protecting, even if it injures my pride. That I am lost and need to be brought home, even thought I am certain I know where I am.

In Jesus, God has promised to find us, and heal us and love us. God has not promised us a simpler life but an abundant one,[[7]](#footnote-7) and in that abundance we will find, not nostalgia but blessing *for blessed are those who know their need of God, for they will be given a saviour*

It’s not nostalgia we long for at Christmas but a saviour who will find us, rescue us, protect us, and at the last, bring us home.

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**Primary text(s) to link:** Zephaniah 3: 14 – 20; Luke 3: 7 - 18

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1. Margaret Wente: Toronto Globe and Mail, date of article uncertain [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Zephaniah 3: 14 - 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Zephaniah 3: 19 – 20 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Zephaniah 3: 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Luke 3: 4 - 6 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Luke 3: 15 - 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. John 10: 10 *I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)