

## ***Pastor Emily's sermon from the Blue Christmas Healing Service ~ "I Just Want Christmas to be Over"***

Today is Nov. 19, 2013, an ordinary day to most, a day when people get up, go to work, go to school, go to church – and prepare for the Thanksgiving holiday just around the corner. But for me, it's a sad day because it is the anniversary of my father's death – Nov. 19, 2006 – seven years ago today. No matter how many years go by, it still an unhappy day for me.

It started about a week before the 19th, with my mom calling me to say that she had to summon an ambulance because my dad could not get out of bed. They came and took him to St. Clair Hospital where I joined them in the emergency room. My dad was not doing well – to say the least – so I called my brother, who lives in another state, and told him what was going on. He is a medical doctor, so I went through everything that was happening. He said, "Well, I'm coming home for Thanksgiving, so I'll see him then." I said, "Steve, I'm no MD, but I don't think he's going to make it till Thanksgiving." And he didn't.

He was first admitted to the heart unit at St. Clair, where they stabilized him and moved him to a regular room. But after only a day or so, his heart crashed so he was moved to the ICU, where they asked me if he had an Advanced Health Directive stating what he did and did not want done to him. I said yes and went to my parents' home to get it and brought it back to the hospital. The nurse pledged to do exactly what he had directed, and so the next call I got was that he had been put into a quiet room at the very end of the hallway to receive hospice treatment. He passed away Nov. 19, 2006, just a few days before Thanksgiving.

In my family, I am the one to cook the turkey and the stuffing and have everyone over. I did so in 2006, but it just wasn't the same. He used to love it that I made his mother's famous black olive stuffing, which I did that year as well and still do.

His memorial service was held at my home church on Dec. 9, 2006, with the church all decorated for Christmas. I was in charge of the service and it was really beautiful, but afterwards, I could hardly do anything to get ready for Christmas, even though I had 4 small children to buy for. We put up an artificial Christmas tree, which we never do, but I just didn't feel like going to all the trouble to get a real one. And I remember at one point it all got to be a little too much for me, so I sat down and cried and said to my husband, "I just want Christmas to be over."

When you're sad at the holidays, no matter what is causing the sadness, you feel this giant disconnect from the rest of the world, at least from what you think the rest of the world is doing. You turn on the TV and see all of the happy people celebrating and laughing and throwing these great parties with delicious food, beautiful presents and glittery decorations, and you realize that that is not what is going on in your life. What's wrong with me. Disconnect. I just spoke of the loss of a loved one that caused this for me (that I know some of you have lost loved ones this year), but the disconnect can come from any number of things. You may be ill or your loved one may be ill – going through surgery, chemotherapy, or chronic pain. You may have lost your job or you may feel that your job is in jeopardy and you fear for your financial security. You may have lost a significant relationship in your life, (happy families on the TV and my family is not so happy), so Christmas this year is going to look much different than it has in the past. Or you may be battling an addiction that has you on edge, fearful of the party scene, fearful of being alone, or fearful of losing control. There's the Norman Rockwell painting of Thanksgiving and Christmas and then there's your life. Quite a difference. Disconnect.

Our scripture passage for tonight is all about being disconnected. It is an ancient psalm, written by a person who lived long before Target started advertising the perfect Christmas, but it speaks into our lives today because it conveys pure human emotion:

**"Incline your ear Lord and answer me, because I am poor and needy. Preserve my life for I am devoted to you, save your servant who trusts in you. Be gracious to me for to you do I cry all day long."**

These are longings of the human heart – the human heart that is going through a painful time and seeks God in the midst of it all. And even better phrasing is found in Eugene Peterson's translation in a very contemporary style. Psalm 86 reads like this:

**"Bend an ear God, answer me. I'm one miserable wretch! Keep me safe – haven't I lived a good life?  
Help your servant – I'm depending on you!"**

Haven't you felt like that? Do you feel like that right now? Well, that's OK, tell Him about it, tell him all about it – He can take it and never doubt that He is listening. One of the best things we can learn from the psalms is that we can say anything to God, especially the stuff that is not pretty. For wasn't it even Jesus who said, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

But even though we feel this disconnect at Christmastime, it is precisely Christmastime when God offers us the most help of all. So if we can wipe the Target commercials and Norman Rockwell paintings out of our minds, there is a beautiful Christmas that is within our grasp.

I grew up watching the classic Christmas animated cartoons, like a Charlie Brown Christmas, Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer and The Year Without a Santa Claus. We still pull them out at my house, dust them off, fire up the old VCR and watch these classics. My favorite was and still is "The Grinch Who Stole Christmas." And I honestly think that this story can be applicable tonight. The Grinch is about a little town called Whoville where the Whos down in Whoville enjoy Christmas a little too much. They decorate and prepare and get all hyped up for the big day. Now the Grinch can't stand this anticipating and celebrating, so he sets out with his little dog to dismantle Christmas.

The big scene in the show comes when the Grinch and his little dog go around and steal everything in the town of Whoville that has anything to do with Christmas. They have a sleigh and a sack and they steal the presents, they steal the decorations, and the Christmas trees. They steal the toys and the candy canes right out of the hands of little sleeping children and they even steal the "roast beast" that is cooking for Christmas supper. They steal every last light bulb and every last ornament and they stuff it all into this huge bag and they drag it all the way to the top of the mountain where he Grinch lives with his little dog. And then the Grinch stops, and with this horribly grotesque smile on his face, he sits and waits for the Whos down in Whoville to discover that they won't have Christmas this year because he has stolen everything. It's sort of like a Job moment for the whole town.

And the pinnacle comes when Christmas morning dawns and the Grinch hears the voices of the people rising in song even though all of the trappings of Christmas have been taken away. The Whos still stand together and sing "Welcome Christmas," with smiles on their faces and love in their hearts. The Grinch learns that Christmas is not about the trappings, but about the joy that the holiday brings.

Now, I wish I could say that the baby Jesus is at the center of the Whos down in Whoville as they are singing, but he's not. This is a secular show. But the parallel is this: The Whos realized, as can we, that it is not the trappings of Christmas that make it such a special day. And we can lose things and people who are very important to us, we can have illness arrive at our door to take our health away, we can lose our job or our security or our relationships, but you know what? Christmas still comes. And that baby is still born in the manger, whether we like it or not. It is the gift of God, coming in the form of an infant, an infant who will live among us, teach us, heal us, talk to us, die for us and rise on the third day, that makes it such a special moment. And every year, that infant comes again, through the power of the Holy Spirit, right into our hearts. No matter what is taken from us, the Christ child still comes. *No matter what is taken from us, the Christ child still comes.*

So, even though we may wish that Christmas was over, even though we may yell at God as the psalmist did, **"God, answer me. I'm one miserable wretch!"** Jesus still comes. Open your heart, especially this year, and let him come in. Praise be to God. Amen.