

It seems to me that decorating for Christmas has begun earlier this year. I'm not talking about stores like Lowe's who always seem to have their Christmas displays up in August. I'm talking about homes. From what I have been observing, people are decorating for Christmas in early November. As I was walking my dogs a week ago, I noticed another house beautifully decorated. I began to wonder, why so early? I wonder if this year we are especially in need of tidings and joy which is associated with Christmas. Now this is not true for all, but Christmas tends to be a time where people make an effort to be nicer to one another, focus on giving to others and taking time with family. I know I find Christmas lights to be comforting – pinpoints of light shining in the darkness.

Needing tidings of comfort and joy is something I understand. We live in a turbulent world - much more so than a few years ago it seems to me. Shootings at schools continue including one this past week in California where two lives were lost. Impeachment hearings are underway for the president of the United States. Football players are beating one another up. Our climate is falling apart. And there is so much more that is going crazy with our world.

The Gospel story also takes place in a time of chaos. The Romans are in charge in Jerusalem. Jesus has come into Jerusalem and is going about teaching and preaching. The religious authorities have been attacking him. They are waiting to take him down. Jesus has responded to their questions. He has even directly criticized them. Surely, the disciples are feeling the tension that surrounds Jesus.

And so in the midst of all this, the disciples get caught up in the beauty of the temple - - the stones and the other gifts around. "According to the 1st century historian, Josephus, the Jerusalem temple of Jesus's day was an awe-inspiring wonder. Newly reconstructed by Herod the Great, the temple's retaining walls were composed of stones forty feet long. The temple occupied a platform twice as large as the Roman Forum and four times as large as the Athenian Acropolis. Herod reportedly used so much gold to cover the outside walls that anyone who gazed at them in bright sunlight risked blinding herself."¹

For the disciples, it was more than about the beauty, the awesomeness of the temple represented the awesomeness of the God they knew. Jesus realizes how caught up they are with the stones and the gifts and tells them that these things will be torn down and many more things will happen. There will be earthquakes and plagues. They will be persecuted and put in prison. They will be betrayed by their very family and some will be put to death. But then Jesus says - not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2451-by-your-endurance>

It is this promise of hope that carries them through the chaos and all of Jesus' predictions of disaster. Not a hair on your head will be hurt. And yet what does this mean when we know that after Jesus' death, that many of his disciples were persecuted and killed? Even if we are destroyed, Jesus still walks with us. Even if our bodies are gone, Christ will come for us – will be with us. We as Christians have hope because we know Jesus is with us every step of our journey. Jesus essentially tells the disciples: 'Regardless of how bad things get, I am with you. Life is going to get hard, but don't lose hope.'² This is the promise that we too hold on to as Christians in this 21st century world. It is a promise we place our trust in. It is a promise that brings us joy and that is strengthened by a faith community as we remind one another of the power of Jesus walking with us. It is a promise that will go deeper than joy Christmas lights and decorations may give us.

One writer³ says, "Make peace, choose hope, cultivate patience, and incarnate love as the world reels and changes. Expect things to get hard. And then expect them to get harder. *Endure* even when they do. Know that God is near, no matter what the world looks or feels like."

That is our challenge as Christians - to hold on to the presence of Christ in the worst of times. To know that the Spirit is there within us and around us. Yesterday evening, I gave the invocation at the Change of Command ceremony for the Raritan Bay Yacht Club. At the end of the prayer, I said "Let us find ways to build up rather than break down, to encourage rather than discourage and to connect with those in need." At least two people came up to ask what was it that I said at the end of that prayer. I replied, "encourage rather than discourage and build up rather than break down." They said something like, "That's right. I really liked that. I needed to hear that." This is an example of how we can proclaim hope. This is an example of how much hope is needed in this world.

This has been our call since the Jesus Christ was among us 2000 years ago. Listen to this letter from Cyprian to Donatus in the early third century.

"This seems a cheerful world, Donatus, when I view it from this fair garden under the shadow of these vines. But if I climbed some great mountain and looked over the wide lands, you know very well what I would see. Brigands on the high road, pirates on the seas, in the amphitheaters men murdered to please the applauding crowds, under all roofs misery and selfishness. It is a really bad world, Donatus, an incredibly bad world. Yet in the midst of it I have found a quiet and holy people. They have discovered a joy which is a thousand times better than any pleasures of this sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They have overcome the world. These people, Donatus, are the Christians ... and I am one of them"

~St Cyprian

We too are Christians. We too are given this joy. We too are persecuted and care not because Jesus helps us overcome this world. When times get tough, dig deep into your

² <https://modernmetanoia.org/2019/11/04/proper-28c-gods-faithfulness-is-eternal/>

³ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2451-by-your-endurance>

life with Christ. Pray. Read scripture. Worship. Talk to your fellow Christians and ask for their prayers and their support. You are one of them! Christians who have hope and joy!