

Nevertheless

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You may recall the story of the little boy who was racing around the house while his mother was getting ready for dinner guests. He was making a mess here and making a mess there. His mom was always having to stop what she was doing to clean up something he had done. And she was just about at her limit. It was then that the little boy on his way out of the house ran pass the beautifully set dining room table and his belt buckle caught hold of the lace table cloth and pulled it and everything on it off the table with an unceremonious crash. The mother lost it. She chased after her son out the door and watched him climb underneath the porch. She was just about ready to go in after him but she realized that the guests would be coming soon so she decided to leave it for her husband to deal with. When her husband came home the mom told him of all the boy did that day and how the icing on the cake was the yanking of the table cloth and that he better go out there and have a talk with his son.

The father went out and got down on his hands and knees and starting crawling under the porch. Way in the back he saw two little eyes staring at him. So he kept crawling toward his son, and then he heard his little boy say, "Is she after you, too?"

That story brings to mind my own little "is she after you too?" story. It happened at Christmas time. I was around ten or eleven years old and I had noticed underneath our Christmas tree a five pound bag of birdseed. Someone had given to my father as a white elephant gift a five pound bag of birdseed. Well, we didn't have a bird but my best buddy Richard Norris did. So I picked up that

bag of birdseed and found my mother and asked her if I could take the birdseed over to my buddy Richard's so they could use it for their bird. She said I could. Now my mother had just finished cleaning the house for the imminent arrival of my grandparents. Well, so excited was I that I could take this birdseed to my friend's that I began to swing this birdseed around and around. I was standing in the hall next to about five different rooms. Well, you know what happened. The bag broke and I became a human birdseed spreader. I did this right in front of my mother. My mother who had just finished cleaning the house. My mother who was expecting the visit of family. My mother who took great pride in a spotless house. I'd never before seen the look on her face I was now seeing. I had never before heard the tone in her voice that I was now hearing. My life began to flash in front of my eyes. She pointed me to the vacuum cleaner and told me that if every last piece of birdseed was not picked up from the five rooms into which I had spread it I might wish for the wrath of God over the wrath that was in store for me from her.

I can only imagine in the craziness of what we now call Christmastime – a scene like that is not necessarily a rarity. Just make your way to a crowded shopping mall or to a crowded airport or to a crowded restaurant and you will likely find some frayed nerves and some stressed pilgrims – and it doesn't take much for tempers to flare and for emotions to show.

Now for me – the human birdseed spreader – I am blessed to be able to say that the emotion and anger I was experiencing from my mother was an exception. It was an aberration. It was something I had never seen before. And so it didn't surprise me a few minutes later as I was electoluxing every nook and cranny in every room seeking to skirt the imminent doom that was promised – it didn't surprise me when my mother came back and saw the tears in my eyes and said, "It's all right. You know I love you. It's just that I had worked so hard." And she got down on her knees and with me we picked up birdseed together.

You see, I was fortunate to live in what I would call a "nevertheless" home. A nevertheless home is a home where as a child you can mess up, you can disappoint, you cannot meet expectations, you can spread birdseed throughout the house – you can be a kid and do kid-like

stupid things --- NEVERTHELESS – you were still going to be loved. You were still going to be cherished. You were still going to be prized as the greatest. A family of four boys can drive a mom and a dad crazy – and yet nevertheless we knew that there was nothing we could do that would ever cause them to withdraw their love. I say that knowing that not every home is that way. Some of you grew up in homes where the love was conditional. Where tempers were not the exception. Where value was tied to performance. Where abuse was the primary language. In many homes there is not a nevertheless.

In light of this perhaps it is good for us to be this morning in the 35th chapter of the book of Isaiah. As we have been learning, Isaiah is the oracle of the prophet who is speaking to Israel in and around the heartbreaking time of the siege and sacking of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians. And for the first 33 or 34 chapters – what some would call First Isaiah – the message that ushers forth from the prophet is the message of warning and doom. Isaiah warns the people that wrath of God is imminent. Israel has displeased the Lord and the result will be the destruction of their homeland. They will be dragged from their homes. They will be displaced for generations. This first section of Isaiah doesn't have a lot of good news. They have displeased. They have disappointed. They have not measured up to expectations. Bad things are soon to happen. And sure enough – Israel is sacked and the people are dragged from their homes and the promised land seems to hold no promise anymore.

But then comes chapter 35 – and in chapter 35 suddenly there comes a new voice. In chapter 35 a new movement begins. In Chapter 35 a new message is proclaimed. Yes, Israel, you have displeased. Yes, Israel you have disappointed. Yes, Israel you are paying for your sins. Yes, Israel the very worst has happened, God has allowed you to pay the price for your folly. Yet, nevertheless ... the day is coming when wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom. The day will come when they shall see the glory of the Lord and the majesty of our God. The ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."

God is not giving up, Israel. God is not holding you sins against you. God is not abandoning you to endless captivity. All of a sudden Israel hears that their God is a nevertheless God. You have disappointed. You have displeased. You have been very foolish – yet nevertheless – God will not withhold his love. Nevertheless God will not forget you. Nevertheless God will deliver you from your own folly.

You see the joy of which the prophet speaks is a joy that comes from knowing that God is a nevertheless God. Joy comes in knowing that though we do enough to mess things up, mess ourselves up, mess the world up – joy comes in knowing that God’s ultimate word to us is nevertheless. Nevertheless I will still love you. Nevertheless I will still save you. Nevertheless I will still forgive you. There is nothing we can do to keep God from saying Nevertheless.

Remember that scene in Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* where Ebenezer Scrooge is taken on his tour by the three spirits. And the Spirit of Christmas Present takes him to the home of his nephew who is with his friends and family enjoying the Christmas feast. And everybody in the room – not aware the Scrooge is listening and watching -- gets to talking about of old crotchety Scrooge – laughing at his miserly, humbug ways – and how the pathetic old man can’t seem to find any ounce of mirth for the holiday. But the nephew won’t join in. The nephew who makes it his practice every year to stop by and wish the old humbug a Merry Christmas and invite him to their home for the feast. The nephew sees the old uncle as something different than do the rest of the assembled. He won’t give in to their mockery. He realizes that the man is paying for his own folly. And finally he raises his glass and offers a toast, “A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to the old man, whatever he is,” he says, “He wouldn’t take it from me, but may he have it nevertheless.”

May he have it nevertheless. And to hear the voice of the nephew is for Scrooge his Isaiah 35. The joy of discovering – that despite himself – he is loved nevertheless.

You see there is a lot that gets said about how you are supposed to feel at Christmastime. There’s a lot of talk about holly and jolly and merry and happy and peace and goodwill – and all of it

is what we would hope not just for ourselves, but for all whom we love. But holly and jolly and merry and happy – seem so much to be tied to the circumstances of our lives. The shifting fortunes of life that can make us either very, very happy – or very, very sad. Hard to wish a holly, jolly Christmas to someone whose just lost their spouse, or their job, or their health. And that’s why it is so important for us to hear the greeting of the prophet who wishes us something different. He wishes us joy. And joy is not holly or happy or merry. Joy is something else – joy is when you come to know of God’s nevertheless. Joy is when you come to know that you are the child of a God who will never stop saying nevertheless to you. That though life and folly may have led you to the wrong places, though circumstances may have your mind and heart in the shadows – Joy is when you know that despite it all --- God’s word to you is nevertheless. Nevertheless you are loved. Nevertheless, salvation will come. Nevertheless, the glory of the Lord will someday be revealed.

Might we call it the mistletoe that the angels hang over the weary old world? That despite the craziness we tend to inflict upon ourselves and others – God hangs this mistletoe over the creation and says, Nevertheless, unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord.

Richard Selzer, a plastic surgeon, tells the story of a patient whose surgery under his hand did not go as planned – the result being a nerve in her face mistakenly severed and her mouth unable to straighten. Selzer recounts the moment at her bedside along with her husband when he delivers the bad news.

The young woman speaks. “Will my mouth always be like this?”

“Yes,” he says, “it will. It is because the nerve was cut.”

She nods and is silent. But then the young man, the husband, smiles.

“I like it,” he says. “It’s kind of cute.”

And then Dr. Selzer notices the man bending to kiss her crooked mouth. And as he does he can see the young man bend his lips to accommodate hers – just to show that their kiss still works.

Nevertheless.

It's where they joy is, isn't it? It's under the mistletoe. The word that comes from the heavens that despite all that has gone on. Despite all we have done to tax the patience of the creator God. Despite how far we've flung the seed. The word still hangs over us – nevertheless – just to show us that our kiss still works.