

Life is a paradox  
[written in oral form]

Advent 3, Year A  
Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-11

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Gordon Allaby

A family was living at the hectic pace experienced by so many this time of the year. A few days before Christmas, they were hosting a party at their home. Their young child was very excited, to the point of annoying the guests. One exasperated parent of the child, told the child to leave and prepare for bed. With great protest, the child did.

After a couple of minutes, that parent went to the bedroom to tuck the child in. The child was taught to say the Lord's Prayer before bedtime, but sometimes the words were a bit off.

As the parent walked in, the child was praying,  
"Forgive us our Christmases as we forgive those who Christmas against us."



Maybe the child was not confused.

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The Christmas season is wonderful and it is the opposite.  
It is a paradox.

Children get excited for gifts, yet sometimes there is disappointment.

Many people overstretch their budget trying to please their children. Christmas can be a fearful time.

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There is tension between the passion to respond to the climate crisis and the passion to be with relatives and friends.  
For most of us, our carbon footprint surges this time of year.

We delight in family gatherings, but sometimes they bring dread and anxiety.  
*We hope no one makes a political comment... or a religious declaration.*

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Contradictions can poke at us, and it is uncomfortable.

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The Christmas spirit can be joyous or it can be sad and lonely.

Christmas is the overlay of a religious pageant.  
Christmas is a secular, capitalistic holiday.  
It is a paradox,.... And so is religion...and so is life.

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Life is interesting.

Too often, most people try to avoid the tensions of the paradox and of conflicting ideology. It seems easier to be exclusive.

We can insulate ourselves in a **fantasy world**, where all conforms and fits together to our model / our perspective.

Or,.... We can accept the diversity, the tension as we strive for wholeness and.....a clearer understanding of truth.

Life is full of uncomfortable contradictions.

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The book of Isaiah is a good example.

Today's text from Isaiah 35 contains a delightful social justice and hopeful message.

The passage begins with the imagery of life springing forth from a desert. From the barrenness there is vitality and glory.

THIS will happen, IF the people do what pleases God, IF they live God's way.

There are examples, such as strengthening/ helping the weak and feeble; comforting the fearful, and trusting in God.

If people live God's way, then wonderful things will happen.

In verse 8 of 35, that way of living is said to be like a highway to redemption, called the "Holy Way."

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This was a great message for the Israelites who were under severe threat from Assyria. And, it makes for an encouraging Advent message, too.

That is if we select the parts that fit our model for the season and for God.

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You See,....we've formed a bit of a fantasy world.

We did that by ignoring the fact that chapters and verses were added much later. Dividing the Bible up that way makes it easier to pick and chose what we like.

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The preceding chapter is all part of Isaiah's pronouncement.

Chapter 34 is about God slaughtering everybody except the Israelites. In essence, killing off the enemy Assyrians.

Is the God of Isaiah a bloodthirsty, tribal deity ..... **or** a gentle, caring, creative, loving parent who is in love with God's children? ???

I think the answer is "Yes."

The God of Isaiah is both.

The writer of Isaiah assumed that God had to exterminate the threat to make them safe, and of course would flood them, the Israelites, with good stuff. Yet, God could be a killer.

Has our understanding of God changed since then?  
and... do we pick and choose what we want to believe?

Moreover, neither of those predictions came true.

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Overall, there are collisions here between reality and myth, AND postmodernism and modern, neo-orthodox theology.

So, how do we respond to such contradiction?  
How do we deal with the tension with different opinions?  
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Tension can be stressful, even painful.

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More often than not, we seek to avoid the tension.  
The common reflex is to settle for less and separate oneself from those who are different.  
That means being exclusive / joining a bubble.

People tend to hide in likeminded bubbles in social media, such as with Telegram or Facebook.

This happens with religious groups, too.

At the extreme ends, there is very little tolerance for diversity.  
This renders the pursuit for purity, which can get ugly.

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I have heard people say that they want nothing to do with MCC because MCC does not openly embrace the LGBTQ+ community. I'm disappointed with MCC's position, yet they do good things.

To be sure, Being abusive and unsafe is unacceptable; however, I think insisting on purity is unacceptable, too.

**Respectful conversation is needed.**

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Monocultures in nature are unnatural, unhealthy, and destructive.  
The same is true with homogeneous groups.

Yet, diversity renders tension and discomfort, and does not provide conformity's affirmation.

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Christianity has countless subgroups, from progressive, social Gospel believers to hardcore, nationalistic groups.

Each clustered together disparaging those who are different.  
Each group seeing and hearing only what they want to.

Each picking and choosing dogma to support their stance.

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This is very sad, and destructive.

We separate / become exclusive because of the illusion that we are reducing the stress of life that's in the diverse collective.

Yet, in honesty, life is living in the tension. It is unavoidable.

Bubbles / isolation creates new and worse tensions.  
Those tensions include frustration, ignorance, anger, and hate.

Separation renders a dichotomy / polarity.

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We seem to have forgotten what is healing and restorative.  
Which is respect, compassion, love, and grace.  
We seem to have forgotten Jesus' message / God's way / the Holy Way. The way is not about being right; it is about healthy relationships.

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I think we need to honestly receive the whole picture, and not hide the uncomfortable parts that we see and hear.

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From the Matthew text, John the Baptist is in King Herod's prison. John prepared the field for the Messiah.

He has heard about Jesus, but wants to be sure this Jesus IS the ONE.

With Messianic language, he asks his disciples to ask Jesus.  
They go to Jesus and ask if Jesus is he is the One?

Jesus told them, "Tell John what "YOU see and hear."  
Tell him everything, and that includes the miracles and that even the poor are included in Jesus' ministry.

Yet, in verse 6, Jesus' rebukes John.  
Our English translation states, "takes no offense".

A better translation from the Greek is "has no occasion of stumbling in me."  
This is in the Indefinite relative clause in the first aorist passive subjective case."

*Believe it or not, there was a time that could understand what I just said. No longer. I now have no idea what that means.*

According to true scholars, Jesus gave a mild rebuke to John for doubting.

THEN in contrast, as John's disciples were leaving, Jesus gives John high praise. Jesus raved:  
John was faithful; He did not bend in the wind of resistance.

Jesus said that John was greater than a prophet.  
Keep in mind, prophets ranked higher than kings.

However, there is another contrast / a paradox in verse 11.

In verse 11, after just saying John was the best, Jesus declared that the least of all people are greater than John.

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This is perplexing and..... wonderful.

Wonderful because in God's view everyone, Everyone, even the least in rank are great / are loved and are received.

God sent God's son for ALL the world.

We do not need to be like John the Baptist in order to redeemed, praised, and to be loved.

Wealth, position, achievements do NOT matter.  
In God's domain, the least are the greatest, TOO.  
That is how God sees things.

Contrast that to our standards of valuing, honouring, or judging people.

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What do we see or hear?

How do we talk about what we experience—what we see or hear?

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Do we redact our stories?

Do we declare God provides and answers our prayers, yet know that did not always happen?

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I think God's way requires honesty.

When I look at our church, I see a lot of messed up people.



I see we could do more. I see we have done a lot.

I see mistakes and flaws.

I see regrets.

I hear disappointing things.

But I also see earnest people striving to follow Christ.  
I see gracious, compassionate, and loving people inspired and empowered by God. Divine things happen through the least.  
I also hear kind words and wonderful music.

I see hope. I see God shining through.

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When I look at myself, I see someone who greatly values peace / pacifism; a person who hopes to always choose pacifism.

And, I see a flawed human infatuated with the war in Ukraine.  
I see someone with the potential to kill.

*Granted, at my age, that potential is greatly diminished.*

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In all honesty what do you see and hear when you look around? That's a rhetorical question....  
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When God looks at us, I think God sees everything.  
I think God sees and hears the Good and bad in us and in all people.

That is why God provided the prophets and Jesus—to help us / to show us a better way.  
God did that / is doing that knowing that the prophets and Jesus would be killed.  
That is impressive love.

We live in a paradox, and in that conflict, we are presented a choice.

We can choose to be in the killing and dying side OR  
on the redeeming and living side.  
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Maybe, in reality, we live in both sides.

Yet, without Christ / without God's love we would only have the killing and death.

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Thanks be to God. We have hope.