

Decorate Your Christmas Tree! **Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11**

Email Scam

How many emails do you receive per day? I don't have the exact number but I guess that I receive an average of 90 emails each day. Of course, most emails are spam and some of them are scams. There are basically two types of phishing scams. First type is "you are a winner!" I have received multiple emails saying that I won the Powerball lottery and the sum of 1.5 million dollars is waiting for my claim. I must be so lucky that I won 1.5 million dollar Powerball games seven days straight! The only problem was that I have never bought a Powerball lottery ticket. I bet you must have received a similar email from Mr. James Hodges, Head of operations. Right?

Another type of scam begins with 'dear friend,' which then tries to tell you someone died and left a big sum of cash for you. I didn't know that I had a rich relative in South Africa whose name is Mohammad. Scam emails always say that big money is waiting and all I need to do to claim the prize is replying to it with all my personal information.

We've done enough reading about email scams and have lived long enough to recognize a scam when we see it. An old proverb says, "If it Sounds Too Good to Be True, it Probably Is." But for those who are in a desperate financial situation, the promise of hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars sounds like great news. Out of their desperation, some people take the bait. We cannot simply blame them because things are tough nowadays.

Rhode Island have become one of the worst Covid-19 hotspot in the United States. Small businesses and local restaurants are struggling for survival. Many people have lost their jobs and are running out of money while the 2nd COVID stimulus bill is stuck in congress. Even after the election, we see the rise of more polarization in our society and we are not sure that we will ever be reunited. Each morning, we read another front page full of disheartening news. We need good news! We desperately need real good tiding rather than the false good news of a phishing scam!

Good News for Desperate People

In today's scripture, we hear good news given to the desperate people of Israel. Prophet Isaiah was caught up in God's spirit and prophesied the good news of deliverance to the people.

"The Spirit of God, the Master, is on me
because God anointed me.
He sent me to preach good news to the poor,
heal the heartbroken,
Announce freedom to all captives,
pardon all prisoners.
God sent me to announce the year of his grace—
a celebration of God's destruction of our enemies—
and to comfort all who mourn. (Isaiah 61:1-2)

Look at the content of his prophecy. It sounds really good. Doesn't it? When Israel first heard this message, Israel was still in exile in Babylon. Things were pretty bad. They had lost all. They had lost their children. They had lost their homes, their jobs, and their identity. They were hungry, afraid and homeless; they were refugees, without status or rights.

In this hopeless situation... when they saw nothing but darkness... the prophet came to these people and said... good news! Good news for the oppressed, good news for the brokenhearted, good news to captives and prisoners, good news to those who mourn. Great! It Sounds Too Good to Be True! What is this good news? What do they get?

“to provide for those who mourn in Zion-- to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.” (v. 3)

What do they get? Garlands, oil, a mantle. Well... these may not be what we expected or wanted if we were the Israelites in this desperate situation. Garlands, oil, and a mantle are more of decorative items rather than practical ones. They don't have cash value and couldn't solve the issues of hunger and homelessness. But God came to the desperate Israelites and told them to decorate themselves. It doesn't seem right. It doesn't seem enough. Does it?

Choose to Live by Hope!

Christmas Decorations are nice, but they hardly serve to make things better. Christmas lights are wonderful, but turning on Christmas light in the dark does not change the world. We are called to proclaim good news that does not seem to have an immediate or practical effect. We often feel we shout good news in the darkness and at worst, it seems meaningless.

Rev. Dr. Derek Weber said, “But shouting in the darkness is a noble profession. It is a calling. When we shout, when we decorate our homes and our churches, we are not saying that we are unaware of difficulties, we are not saying that we are oblivious to bad news, but we are saying that we choose to live by good news. We are saying that we choose to live by hope and not despair.”¹

Choosing to live by hope can change people and the way they see themselves. Let me share a picture with you. [ppt] This painting is “The Raft of the Medusa” by Théodore Géricault. [때오도르 제리코] This painting depicts the aftermath of the wreck of the French naval ship Méduse. As you can see, this painting depicts both hope and despair of people. [ppt] From the lower left corner of the canvas, you can find dying people in despair. [ppt] On the opposite side, you can see reviving people in hope! They are in the same boat. They are in the same situation. However, some are dying while some are thriving. The only difference between them is hope! Hope sustains life. It brings energy. It brings faith and it brings joy. Joy changes everything.

Garlands, the oil of gladness, and the mantle of praise ... they were generally given to honored guests at joyful moments like weddings or festivals. They are decorative items but they surely have the power to bring joy and hope. By giving these gifts to the Israelites, God is telling them that “you are no longer the humiliated people. You are not a failure but my people, my beloved!” They are the sign of God's promise for deliverance from exile.

Decorate Your Christmas Tree! That will bring Hope and Joy

We are in a pandemic exile. But at the same time, we are in the season of Advent, the season of waiting for Christ's coming with expectation and hope. The Pandemic, increasing rate of unemployment, polarization of the society, rampant racism, substance abuse and personal struggles... there are many difficulties we are facing today. But my friends, don't let them define

¹ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/companys-coming/third-sunday-of-advent-year-b-lectionary-planning-notes>

who you are. Choose to live by the good news. Choose to live by hope and prepare our space, our hearts and our world for our Christ who comes!

If you don't feel that you have anything to celebrate in this pandemic exile, start with decorating your Christmas tree. I don't know how many of you decorate a Christmas tree every year but personally, I am not a big fan of decorating something. Unlike me, my wife, Juhee loves to decorating the house. After several years of living in the U.S., Juhee wanted to get a Christmas tree and ornaments but I didn't like it because it would be me who would have to get rid of them afterwards. But, Juhee finally bought our first Christmas tree a few days before Christmas 2008. [ppt] It was a small plastic Christmas tree and two bags of ornaments. (Many thanks to Juhee for not bringing a big live Christmas tree.) Juhee seemed so happy and wanted to decorate the tree with me. I didn't like it but you know... "happy wife, happy life!" so I helped her. But, I soon found myself enjoying hanging the colorful ornaments on the tree. After we set the Christmas tree on a bookshelf in the living room, I could feel the changing atmosphere of the house. A Christmas tree brings joyful childhood memories of Christmas and recreates that feeling. But most of all, it helps us to remember the sacred memory of our salvation, a baby in a manger, and the glorious praise of angels. This remembrance of Christmas reminds us of God's faithfulness and love for us. These are the basis of our hope and joy.

Decorate your Christmas tree! Remember the joyful story of Christmas. And choose to live by hope and share that joy with people around you! God bless you. Amen.