

Once the idea for children's chat popped into my head, there was one movie scene that just kept playing over and over and over in my mind. Obviously, it is that time of year, the time of year for...*Christmas Vacation*. Now, I know it isn't everyone's moose head cup of eggnog, but it's one of my family's faves. When you strip away some of the ridiculousness, the heart of it is about a guy who just wants his family to have the picture perfect Christmas with all the traditions and Kodak moments.

As Clark Griswold is building the happiest family Christmas in his mind there are several boxes that have to be checked off, gigantic, bigger than your living room Christmas tree, turkey dinner with all the trimmings, presents hidden in the attic for the perfect amount of surprise, and of course, the outside of the house has to match the inside, there must be Christmas lights galore! He drags Rusty outside to just coat the house in Christmas lights, and he declares, "I've always wanted to do this," which seems to indicate that he has never fully decorated his house with lights for Christmas, so you know this is going to be interesting. As he is assembling and pulling things out of boxes, he pulls out this just massive ball of lights that are twisted and tangled up in the most impossible knot you could ever imagine. He lifts it up and drops it into Rusty's awaiting arms and says, "Little knot here..." and then just goes to get another box of lights.

Of course, Rusty rolls his eyes and is like you have to be kidding me, this is a thankless task, but then the giant knot of lights is never mentioned again. As I was thinking about this, I thought, ya know, sure, maybe the knot was just chucked into the corner and more lights found, or maybe, the finished product of the house, covered in so many lights it sets off alarms at the power plant, indicates that Rusty actually got that tangle of lights undone. I know it's a movie and I shouldn't overthink it. It was a gag meant for laughs and nothing more, but just imagine with me for a moment that Rusty sat down in the garage and diligently and faithfully untangled that entire knot of lights so that his dad could decorate the house. It would be an incredible feat, and would show a deep love and dedication to his dad, even when his dad is being over the top and ridiculous.

My brain has been twisting around its own tangle of thoughts this week as I've considered all of this in relation to Advent, to God, to our relationship with God, and to our text this morning from Isaiah. Now, there is *a lot* going on in this passage. It actually may sound a little bit familiar because the beginning of the text is the portion of Isaiah that Jesus reads in the synagogue in Nazareth at the start of his ministry, so we know the rhythm of it a little bit. To set the context for the actual text though, Isaiah speaks this word to God's people as they are in a post-exile world. They

have returned to Jerusalem from Babylon and you have to imagine that they thought things were going to return to a sense of stability and normalcy, but unfortunately, that is just not the case. They have returned to a homeland that still shows signs of war and devastation, there are new people living in their land, and everything is just...hard. They thought they would come home to singing and dancing and instead, it's another kind of exile. They are mourning and worried about how this is all going to work out and just how they are supposed to handle all of this stress.

Into this tangle of emotions, Isaiah brings a message of hope, a message of hope about God's anointed, about God's Messiah. Isaiah proclaims that the one who is anointed by God's spirit will do remarkable things, the Messiah has been sent with a mission, and that mission is sevenfold. God has sent the Messiah to do the following: bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, release to the prisoners, proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, comfort all who mourn, to provide for those who mourn, and to give them a garland instead of ashes. It is a multi-faceted mission that has been placed before the Messiah, but all of those facets are deeply intentional. There is a reason that the Messiah has been sent to do *seven* things, because seven is the symbolic number of completeness in scripture, so really what is being said here is that

the mission of the Messiah is to open and transform *everything*, all of the world will be transformed and changed through the work of God's anointed.

For a people who have just returned home for a harrowing journey after being in exile for decades, these would have been words of comfort, promise, and ultimately of hope. I mean think about it. Good news to the oppressed...these are people who are still under occupation, even though the Persians were generally pretty hands off, these were a people who still had an intimate memory of the trauma of Babylonian occupation. They will receive good news. Binding up the brokenhearted...these are a people who potentially lost family members on the road back from Babylon, who are looking at their homeland which still lies in ruins, whose Temple is in pieces, who have lost their sense of identity and place. Their broken pieces will be bound together anew. Liberty to the captives...they have literally just experienced this. They were in captivity and God set them free. But not only that, we all know that captivity is not always of the physical variety, we can be held captive by so many things and God says liberty will be granted. Release to the prisoners...the same message of hope, whatever keeps you in chains will be loosed. Proclamation of the year of the Lord's favor...this was a biblical concept of the year of Jubilee, where debts are forgiven, slates are wiped clean, and everyone gets to start fresh. These are a people that

need a fresh start desperately and God grants it. Comfort to the mourning, garland instead of ashes, provision for them...all of the pain and the sorrow and the grief that they hold will be held, given a balm of healing, and turned into moments of hope and gladness. God is telling them that their entire world, all of creation, all of their bodies and souls will be transformed anew by the coming of the Messiah. Could you imagine a more freeing message?

The hope is that we *can* imagine that message because that is the message of Advent. The Messiah whom Isaiah promises is Christ who is quickly coming into the world, and Jesus himself declares that all of these things are what he has come into the world to do, for us. For us. And that is almost incomprehensible because a lot of the time we feel like that big ball of Christmas lights, tangled and twisted up, proclaiming to the world, just a little knot here, knowing that how we feel and what we are experiencing is a lot more complicated than just a little knot. And we try desperately to untangle ourselves, we claim that we long for liberation, but often that is only if it is liberation on our terms, liberation we can control, where we can dictate what we keep and what we let go of, and how much we have to unclench and untangle. Jesus comes into that knot of our hearts and souls and he sits down like Rusty had to have with that knot of lights and he

lovingly and diligently untangles us, liberates us, frees us from all of the things that bind us up and keep us knotted.

So people of God, here anew the promises of Isaiah, the promises of the Messiah given for you. Christ is coming to bring good news to the oppressed...all of those places in your life where you feel trodden upon, closed in, ignored, shunned, and shamed, tamped down by the weight of the world. Christ sets you free. Christ is coming to bind up the brokenhearted. If you walk through this holiday season with grief and pain in your heart, loss of a loved one, loss of a relationship, loss of a sense of place or self, whatever has left your heart in pieces, Christ will bind you together. Christ is coming to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners. We all have those things which we feel chain us up, tie us down, keep us in knots. Addiction, anxiety, fear, depression, worry, expectations of others, the list could go on and on. Christ liberates us from those things and says they do not have control over your soul. Christ is coming to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. We are given a clean slate, a fresh chance, a new dawn to start anew, to begin again, to return to the Lord our God. Christ will welcome you home. Christ is coming to comfort those who mourn, provide for them, give them a garland instead of ashes. We all are mourning something, it could be fresh, it could be scarred over, it could be mourning

for the pain we see our world, our neighbors in. Christ brings healing hope for all those places in our hearts and in our world that need a word of grace and promise, of restoration and strength.

Christ is coming into the world to restore us, liberate us, untangle us, and set us free. Christ is coming to replant us in the world, grow us into an oak of righteousness who is strong in the face of the difficult, who plants more seeds to help others grow, who provides shelter and strength for others, who is a beacon of hope for others. And sure, today you might feel more like an acorn, dropped in the middle of nowhere, but Christ is quickly coming and will set you free to grow into the amazing child of God you were created to be.

There is no doubt that the world we live in is hard, as hard as 8,000 Christmas lights tangled all together, but thankfully for us, Christ is in the untangling business. There is no knot too big, no brokenness too shattered, no pain too deep that Christ cannot come and unbind and heal. The Messiah is coming...he is already here...and he has come to set us free. Take that freedom, feel that untangling of your heart, and use it to set others free. Take others knots and say, here let me help you. We are set free so that we can be about Christ's work in the world. The world has dropped a ball in our laps and said...little knot here...let's get to work. **AMEN!!!**