

RE-COLLECTED

December 21, 2011, at 6 p.m.

(Service of the Longest Night)

by Rev. Shelli Williams



ST. PAUL'S

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

5501 Main Street

Houston, Texas 77004-6917

713-528-0527

www.stpaulshouston.org

Texts: Isaiah 40:1-5, 27-31; Revelation 21:1-5; John 1:1-9, 14

Isaiah 40: 1-5, 27-31

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. ²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

³A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

²⁷Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God"? ²⁸Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. ²⁹He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.

³⁰Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; ³¹but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

Revelation 21:1-5

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true."

John 1:1-9, 14

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

I. Recollection

We don't often use the word recollection. For most of us, it is the act of remembering, of recalling, maybe even sort of reliving. This season sort of brings that out for us, doesn't it? We remember those who are not with us this Christmas. As we get closer to Christmas, I am thinking more and more of my grandparents, remembering past Christmases and big holiday gatherings as we went from house to house. We don't really do that anymore. Our gatherings tend to be smaller and more contained now. I also am remembering Christmases when even I was a different person, with plans and dreams that now seem to be not quite as important as they did then. I am remembering this past year – the things I wish I hadn't done, the things I wish I hadn't said, the times that I wish I had spoken out or stood up and did not. I am grieving this night over lost dreams and lost opportunities. And I am remembering what I thought about Christmas as a child. It was magical and full of mystery. I want that back – maybe not the magic, but certainly the mystery. Recollection is good. Don't you think it makes us a little bit more complete? After all, we all have a past. We all have things that are always a part of us.

Recollection, in the context of one's spiritual life, though, means attention to the presence of God in one's life. It's not really that far off from the idea of pulling

all that makes you who you are into focus. It is essentially directing one's mind, one's heart, and one's life toward rest in God. Living a recollected life has little to do with happiness or calm. It is not about things going our way. It's certainly not about God answering all our prayers in the way we think they need to be answered. Living a recollected life means living a life that is balanced and enduring. It means being alive. It means knowing that God is with us and that there is always something more than what we see.

II. From Wilderness to Life

Look at the Scriptures that we read for this evening's service. Isaiah's words of comfort are not speaking to a comfortable people. Rather, these are people wandering in the wilderness, living in lostness, and mired in meaninglessness. These are a people who are living every day with struggle and defeat, who want desperately to find a way out, to find meaning in it all. This is a people whose home and whose way of life has been all but destroyed and the prophet proclaims that God is coming to show them a new and different way to live, a new and different way to look at life even in the midst of darkness. Now notice here that God does not promise to put things back the way they were before. God is not limited to simply rebuilding what was destroyed or taken away. No, God is taking what is there and re-creating, making new, lifting valleys, lowering mountains, and, ultimately, when all is said and done, revealing a glory that we've never seen before. "Comfort," then is not merely solace, but transformation. God has promised a new way of being and a new way of seeing.

And then our text from Revelation gives us a glimpse at the end of the story as we know it. But, yet, it is the very beginning of life. At the same time that we are remembering and perhaps still grieving those things and those people who we have lost, we are given this reminder of what's to come. It is an affirmation that this story that began when God breathed life into Creation is not quite finished. And we are part of it, part of the ongoing conversation that began long before we got here and will continue long after we are gone.

The point is that the past and the future connect us all. I think that's what the Scripture is reminding us – not that there is some promised land out there somewhere where we all come out OK, but, rather that we are part of it now. We, like those who came before us, are part of building that future city, building the Kingdom of God in its fullness. The story is not quite finished.

And our Gospel passage, as familiar as it is to us, sometimes almost sounds too poetic to be realistic. It's reminding us that God was there in the beginning – there, in the darkness, in the void, in the chaos and despair. And then God brought the light into being. And the light shines even in that darkness. It doesn't say that God is *IN* the light. God *IS* the Light shining into the darkness. The Light and dark cannot be separated. They are part of one another because they are part of God. And realizing that God is present even in that darkness, even in its re-creation, is what it means to be recollected. Our beginnings, our past, our present, and our eternity are all connected. God is walking us through to the fulfillment, to the making of all things new. We just have to recollect ourselves so that we can see it.

III. When Holly and Jolly Get Lost

And yet, sometimes life is just hard. I mean, we are usually made to believe that this season should be a joyous one of celebration. We are told to put aside our worries and our cares and enjoy ourselves; we are told to embrace the celebrations and be happy; we are told to look toward the light, the birth of the Christ child. And yet, tonight, here we sit in darkness. What do you do when your holly and your jolly gets a little lost in the midst of the celebration?

Tonight is the longest night of the year – nearly 14 hours of darkness in our part of the world. It is the night of the Winter Solstice, which marks the first day of winter for the Northern Hemisphere. To early astronomers, the sun appeared to hang in the sky, suspended, paralyzed, as if waiting for some word to move on.

So it seems that on this night of darkness, it is appropriate to acknowledge those parts of our lives that do not seem to “fit” with the joyous season – our frustrations, our fears and anxieties, our anger, our depression, our loneliness, our

despair, our grief. These are not things that we can just leave at the door to the season and then pick them up later. They are part of us. And just as we bear them, God takes them and holds them and in what can only be attributed to the mystery of God, somehow manages to bathe them in light. And, as we recollect ourselves, we know that light is there. And we know that whatever it is our life is made of now, it is never the end.

Now, that's not to say that the darkness is not sometimes overwhelming. There are times when we just can't seem to find the light.

At St. Paul's, we start each Sunday Advent service in a darkened sanctuary. I remember my first year here. On the first Sunday of Advent, I was to read the first reading. When I walked into the sanctuary and it was dark, I just thought that there was something wrong with the lights. I soon figured out that we meant to do this. We meant to start in darkness. Because it's a way of seeing the light! Then my biggest concern was whether or not they were going to turn the lights up a bit so that I could see to read what I was supposed to read!

We're all like that. OK, fine, I'll walk in darkness — as long as I have enough light to see! But the darkness ensues. Why can't our season be like that first Christmas, full of hope and light?

Well, think about the story. It is the story of a young, frightened teen-age girl, pregnant with a child who is said to be not her husband's. It is the story of a child born in a dirty animal stall. It is the story of a family who was forced to travel a great distance and endure numerous dangers along the way to respond to a forced registration with an oppressive government. It is the story of a family of refugees who then had to flee their homeland so that their newborn child would not be killed. And yet, as we know, the story is bathed in the light of a star. *The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

IV. Re-collected

Probably more than ten years ago, my family was sitting at our Thanksgiving table and my grandmother, who was then well into her nineties, was telling us those

things that she missed doing that she could no longer do. One was to have the freedom to pick out greeting cards for birthdays and other occasions for family and friends. Since she no longer drove, she was forced to use sort of “generic” cards rather than picking out personal sentiments for each person. Well, let me tell you, my grandmother was not always the easiest person for whom to choose a gift. So, I considered my next thought positively revelatory! I went to the Hallmark store and spent several hours choosing cards for every person in her life, for every occasion, and for every unforeseen circumstance. When she opened it, she didn’t understand at first – this pile of impersonal, unsigned cards. But when I explained it, she almost got choked up. Because she realized that it gave her back part of the person she always was. I gave her that strange pile of cards every Christmas for the next ten years and, I have to confess, I haven’t been in a Hallmark store since she passed away. But, you see, it was a way of giving her the gift of being recollected, of being who she was called to be, of knowing the presence of love, the presence of God, in her life.

The promise of this season is not that there will be no darkness. Life is full of shadows and longest nights. But in the midst of the darkness, God dwells, unknown and mysterious, the Word that created and dwelled in the darkness even before Light came to be. And even in our darkest places, lighting a single candle of hope dispels the night. That, my friends, is indeed the message of the season. God tiptoes in to the night and gently, very gently, hands us hope for our world, peace for our souls, and light for our longest nights in the form of a baby who shows us the way to walk through the darkness so that the whole world might be truly bathed in light.

It is difficult to see the holy in the ordinary. We usually need something extraordinary like a baby being born or something. It is even harder to see the holy in the darkness. We usually need a bit more light. But the truth is, God was never and is never lost, and we are never separated from the sacredness that is God. Sometimes we just have to be shown how to see it. Sometimes we just need to live recollected lives.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin once said that “*by virtue of the creation and, still, of the incarnation, nothing here below is profane for those who know how to see.*” He was talking about the darkness, reminding us that there is no place where God is not, no place where God’s holiness and God’s Presence does not enter with the transforming power of the hope of new life. We just have to learn to look for it, to be recollected.

Living a recollected life is hopeful, rather than blindly naïve. It is recognizing that our past, be it joys or pain, is important, that it is part of us, that those who came before us and had a part in forming who we are remain with us. It is about recognizing our limits. It is also about recognizing that God’s Presence is there – in our memories, in our present, and in our next step. We are living our eternity even as we speak. It is part of us now. That is what it means to be recollected. That is what it means to walk in the Light that is God that shines even into our darkest moments.